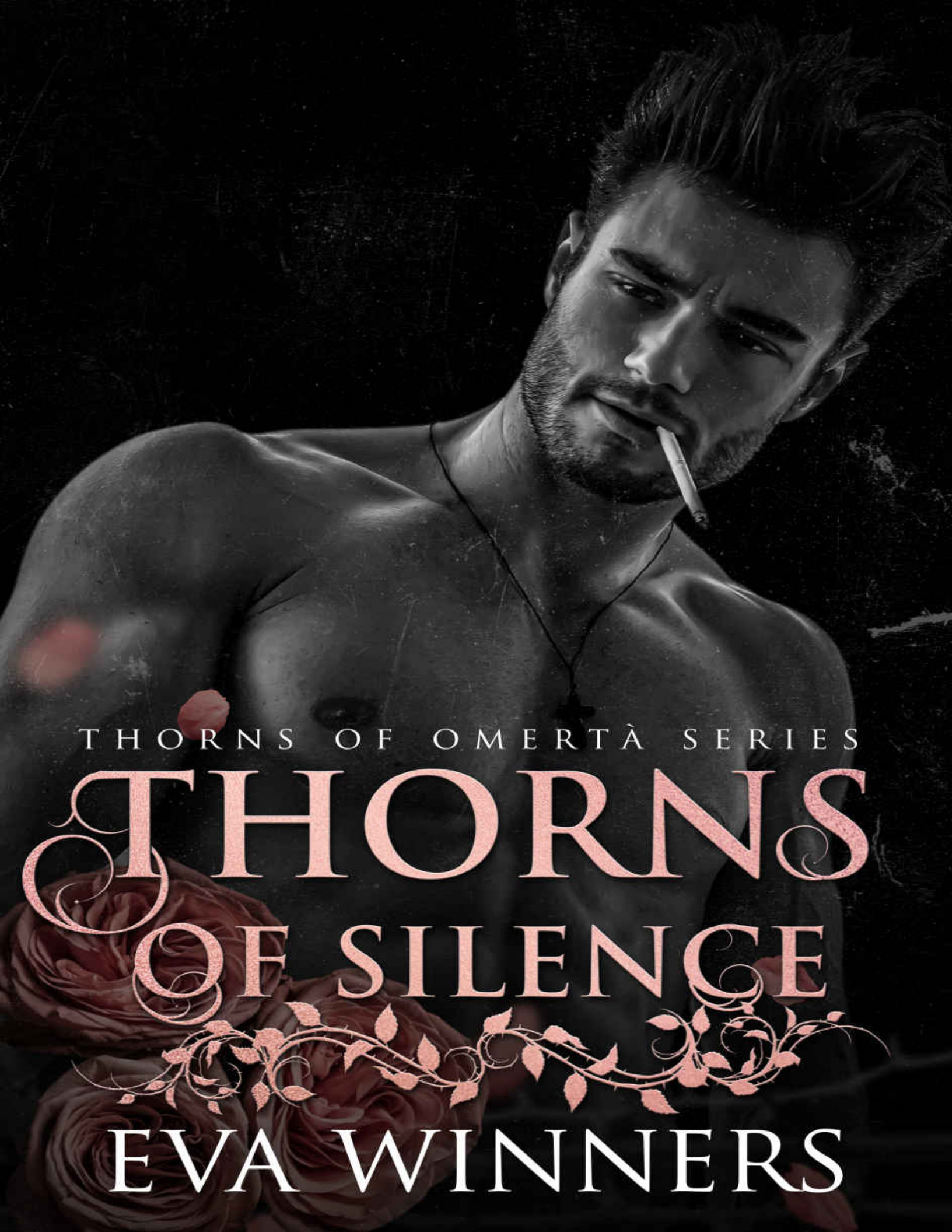
THORNS OF OMERTÀ SERIES
THORNS OF SILENCE
EVA WINNERS

THORNS OF OMERTÀ SERIES

THORNS OF SILENCE

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THORNS OF OMERTÀ SERIES

Each book in the Thorns of Omertà series can be read as a standalone with the exception of Thorns of Lust and Thorns of Love, Tatiana Nikolaev's story.

The timeline and events in Thorns of Silence coincide with the Stolen Empire Trilogy.

Please be aware of potential spoilers.

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PLAYLIST

https://spotify.link/rTpdwhe7ADb

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello readers,

Please note that this book has some dark elements and disturbing scenes to it. Please proceed with caution. It is not for the faint of heart.

Don’t forget to sign up to Eva Winners’s Newsletter (www.evawinners.com) for news about future releases.

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To my mom and dad:
I'll never fully understand your silence,
but I finally grasp how much it took.

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BLURB

He told me he loved me, then abandoned me.

My sister was his first choice. Too bad for him, I refused to be his second.

Dante Leone was bad news with a gorgeous exterior and a dangerous mind. Emotionally unavailable and slightly unhinged, he was a heartbreak waiting to happen. Again.

I ran. He gave chase, and my fate was sealed.

Roaming the world, I searched for a vital part of me. There'd be no new beginning until I found my answers. My taste of freedom was sweet yet lonely. And oh so fleeting.

I should have known *he* would catch up to me. After all, he thrived on the chase. I'd learned that the hard way.

But guess what?

I was no longer the woman he seduced all those years ago. I no longer believed the pretty lies that passed his lips or the false promises in his deceitful eyes.

My name is Phoenix Romero, and I'd make the rules this time around.

Like my namesake, I had risen from the ashes, and this time, I would be the one to make him burn.

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I now think, love is rather
Deaf, than blind,
For else it could not be,
That she,
Whom I adore so much,
Should so slight me,
And cast my love behind.

Ben Jonson

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PROLOGUE

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PHOENIX, 18 YEARS OLD

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Love is blind and deaf.

I never understood Mamma's words until I experienced my first heartbreak. It wasn't innocent. It wasn't gentle.

It tore me into tiny little pieces and changed every part of me, making it impossible to fit all the fractured bits of me back together. It was brutal in the way it erased my happiness and left me with only bitterness.

I lay in the hospital bed of a private clinic somewhere in upstate New York, the view of the snow-capped mountains in the distance breathtaking, but all I could focus on was this pain.

Staring at the tightly wrapped form, I extended my arms and reached for my baby, despite exhaustion weighing heavy in my bones. I pushed the visions of Reina and me as little girls, cooing softly as we wrapped her dolls tight like burritos, away from my mind. I couldn't think about my sister right now. Steady breaths, Phoenix.

"Can… I… hold…" My lips moved around the words, but of course no sound came out. I attempted to sign, but my fingers were numb. I didn't know whether they were a him or a her, but I wanted to see my baby. I needed to memorize their features so I could play them back for the rest of my life. I folded my hands, unable to sign another word. "Please."

I was freezing, my hands shivering, rattling my bones. I was too cold and numbness was quickly expanding through me. The ache in my chest

that had been a constant for the past nine months suddenly threatened to swallow me whole.

My mind blurred, and I was vaguely aware of someone moving, but my focus was pinned on that little bundled body. I refused to look away.

“Please.” A soundless word. A desperate sob. A tremble of my lip.

I struggled to keep my hands outstretched, the weight of them overwhelming me with every second that passed. My body didn’t feel like my own, and I knew it was from the weird haze of the drugs muting my senses.

Suddenly, I was surrounded, nurses and doctors blocking my view and pushing my bed out of the way. My hands fell to my sides, but I fought to bring them to the chain around my neck, to grasp the black rectangle hanging right next to the promise ring. I just needed to feel the coolness of it under my fingertips… There.

I fumbled with the device, then with dimmed hope, I pressed the button. Over and over and over again. Click. Click. Click.

Someone hovered above me, but it wasn’t the person I needed to see. Grandma’s eyes searched my face, weary and swimming with fear.

Click… Click… The lump in my throat grew along with my tremors. Click.

It was the last time I’d press that button.

He never came. Unconsciousness pulled me under with the knowledge that he broke his promise again.

It was the last time he’d fail me. I’d never give him the chance to do it again.

Two Years Later

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ONE

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DANTE

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23 YEARS OLD

Tap… tap… tap… tap… tap.

I watched Dr. Freud's pen gently hit the folder, her eyes narrowed on me, almost as if she could sense the tension simmering beneath my skin.

Her gaze met mine, determination flaring in them. She was testing my control despite the fact that my potential to cause harm set her on edge. As a slow smile tugged on my lips, she glanced back at the file in her lap. Not that there was much there.

She finally broke the silence. "Let's talk about what happened two years ago."

I sat back, resting an elbow on the armrest. This room was meant to inspire calm and comfort, to serve as a safe haven to spill your secrets. Unfortunately, I had enough to color the room pitch black. And that wasn't even counting the ones I had no memory of.

"We've been over this, Doc. I don't know what else you expect me to say. Considering I can't remember, it should be a short conversation," I drawled lazily.

She inhaled a breath, frustration marring her perfectly proportionate face, and dove right in, going for the jugular. "You remember *something*."

"Not much."

She was right, I did remember some things, but I could never be sure if they were real or imagined, and the uncertainty made me feel weak. Things came through the fog and receded before I could grab hold of them, leaving me agitated and ready to rain fury on those around me.

Burning. Cutting. Scratching. My skin itched, but I refused to scratch it, lest she scribble the observation in her little notebook like I was an animal to be studied. Instead, I tapped my fingers on the armrest while Dr. Freud watched the motion. She was always watching.

That same determination entered her posture and she straightened her shoulders. “Take me through what you *do* remember.”

I chuckled and said, “Maybe it’s not appropriate for your ears,” purposely making it sound suggestive. Not that I was attracted to the woman. Yeah, she was beautiful, but nothing about her worked for me.

She tugged at the charm on her necklace, an unusual symbol I couldn’t quite distinguish, and raised a brow. “Try me.” Hesitation flickered across her expression, a blush staining her cheeks, but then she went for it. “And no bullshit, Dante.”

That was all she’d get from me. It wasn’t as if I could tell her that my kidnapping likely had something to do with my father’s mafia-related activities. Angelo Leone was a cruel bastard, and he did business with even worse men than himself.

I ran a thumb across my bottom lip. “Since you insist, Doctor.” She waited with bated breath for my next words. “Sometimes I dream about them.”

“Who?”

“The men and women who were there,” I answered, looking at the clock.

She accepted my answer but continued her probing. “Why do you think these men and women appear in your memories? Or rather, why do you think they appear in your recollections of that time?”

“Because monsters come in all shapes and sizes.” Impatience burrowed beneath my skin, itching like my scarred torso. I hadn’t tortured or killed in over a week and the need to lash out pulsed so strongly in me that I could almost taste it. If I didn’t see some action soon, I was afraid I’d be swallowed up by my own demons.

Two things triggered my blackouts that terrorized everyone around me. Alcohol—beer excluded—and excess energy.

I dreamed of revenge. I planned how I’d dish it out, but the only problem was that my monsters were invisible. Faceless men and women. My dreams and hazy memories mocked me, whispering things I couldn’t understand.

So I focused on the one thing I could control: revenge against my father. He'd refused to pay the ransom, leaving me at my kidnappers' mercy. The end result was a broken mind and a scarred body, and that simply wouldn't do.

"Do you know what they did to you?" she asked, averting her gaze and focusing on my virtually empty file. I knew what she was hinting at—sexual, mental, or physical abuse. The joke was on her though, because my mental and physical abuse began with my own father when I was a mere child.

"No," I lied. Well, not technically. I knew they'd tortured me, because I'd woken up in the hospital with a medical file so thick that doctors had to be called in from around the country to assist with my treatment. The reprieve was in not remembering, and I honestly preferred it that way.

"Your memories might come back," she hedged.

I shrugged, not pressed about it. I felt lighter when I discovered my memories had been wiped. In the weeks following my hospital stint, they slowly started trickling in, hazy and distorted. I remembered my childhood, shit my father put us through, my bond with my brother. It was the memories surrounding the kidnapping—the months before, during, and after it—that had yet to return. I came to terms with it when it sunk in that there would be no surefire way to reverse it. One thing I could control was who knew of this… *weakness*. I didn't want anyone aside from my immediate family knowing about it. I didn't need pity; I didn't need to worry about my position in the Omertà being compromised. I was ready to put it all behind me.

"I'm fine if they don't."

Her eyes flickered with a range of emotions. Her interest in me was born out of curiosity. Dr. Freud's PhD thesis on criminal minds won her several awards and earned her her doctorate. She didn't know my profession, but I knew she suspected it.

She fumbled with her pen as she jotted something down. "I believe you're blocking your mind's progress at this point." I rolled my eyes, though I had to admit she had a point. "How is your dating life going?"

I laughed. "Are you asking me out, Doctor?"

She looked up, flustered. "That would be highly unprofessional."

I grinned. "I won't tell."

She flushed a deeper shade of red. “But I’ll know.” Dr. Freud had an undeniable sense of integrity, although I believed she was hiding something herself. Not that I cared enough to look into it. “Has your dating life changed since your kidnapping?”

Yes. No. I don’t know.

Images of dandelions and smiles on a face that hid in the dark flashed in my mind, but they were gone before I could hit pause. *As always*.

“I hate dating,” I said instead.

Understanding, or maybe even realization, flashed in her eyes, and she probably thought she’d uncovered something, a piece of the puzzle. In truth, she could have, and if she pulled at the thread hard enough, we’d get somewhere unpleasant.

But I was done with this conversation. The invisible door in my mind slammed shut as I flicked my attention back to the clock. Our time was up. *Thank fuck.*

The only reason I came back week after week was to honor the conditions of my probation after I smashed through a whole fucking bar. I could have made the issue disappear, but some moron had decided to live stream it.

I stood up and buttoned my jacket, glad to be done with today’s session.

“Until next time, Dr. Freud.”

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TWO

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DANTE

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23 YEARS OLD

Cesar, my right-hand man, barged into the office of my club in Paris. l didn't need to have the gift of clairvoyance to know trouble was on the horizon. I just didn't think it would irrevocably alter my life. Not even amnesia could cure it.

Not this time.

"We have a situation at the bar," Cesar announced, his tone cautious. "Someone roofied a girl, and her deaf sister is going ballistic."

Deaf sister.

"The Romero girls," my brother and I hissed at the same time. Amon jerked upright, pushing the laptop out of his way and scrubbing a hand down his face. Amon and I had been hopeful we'd draw in large crowds when we opened this club together. It was a perfect way to launder money —women, alcohol, drugs. What was there not to like? And while it remained an easy way to wash money, it was becoming increasingly… tiresome.

Reina, the curly blonde young woman with a sunshine attitude, could make you puke sun rays. Her sister, Phoenix, on the other hand, seemed to stick to herself and her own shadows. I hadn't seen Phoenix since she was… What? Sixteen or so? I didn't know much about Romero's daughters, aside from the fact that they resembled each other, aside from one being blonde and the other dark-haired and deaf. There was never any reason or interest to learn more about them.

Although, I caught plenty of glimpses of Reina, thanks to my brother's stalking.

"Who?"

“He didn’t touch her. Her sister and friends were there and on him.” Cesar was breathing harshly.

The way my older brother—by a mere few weeks, but he never seemed to let me forget it—jumped to his feet and bolted out the door should have been my first clue that he was beyond obsessed when it came to Reina Romero.

I recognized the signs even before he did himself.

“Are you sure she was roofied?”

Cesar shot me a wry look. “Yes, it’s pretty clear. And her friends went after Roberto to kick his ass.”

I cocked my eyebrow. I didn’t realize the Romero girls surrounded themselves with fighters.

As we made our way through the lounge and then into the club, the music pumping like it was 1999, the moment my eyes landed on her, my heartbeat stopped, then jump-started again like I’d been tasered.

Dark brown hair. The sweetest body I had ever seen. Skin that looked softer than butter even under the shallow lights of the club.

The images slammed into me, burning my skull and causing me to almost miss a step. A carefree girl with sapphire-blue eyes, dancing seductively around me, just out of reach. A temptress with soft lips that brushed against mine. Smiles that could melt polar ice caps. A melodious laugh that had the power to stop my fucking heart.

Why did it feel so fucking real?

I shook my head, chasing the images away. I’d never heard Phoenix Romero laugh. The last time I saw this girl, she was a scared-shitless teenager. It was clearly a dream, because she definitely wouldn’t have been dancing around me seductively.

In fact, this girl looked so sweet she could cause a toothache. She was as innocent as they came, and probably just as boring. Except, my dick didn’t seem to get that, fixated as it was on her sweet ass.

Down, boy. This wasn’t the girl for us. Romeros and Leones just didn’t mesh.

Amon plowed through the crowd toward the sisters, Phoenix struggling to hold up her younger sibling.

“Let me.” Amon grabbed Reina from her while Phoenix shot daggers at him.

I tapped Phoenix on her slim shoulder, the electricity buzzing through my fingers like fucking lightning. *Static*, I told myself. Maybe the girl didn't use dryer sheets.

Her gaze met mine and oxygen left my lungs as more images of her slammed into my mind.

Writhing under my body.

Moaning against my lips.

Dancing in a field of dandelions.

Laughing under the moonlight.

What the *fuck* was happening? Maybe I was finally losing my mind. God knew it'd been a long time coming.

Fuck!

I didn't need this shit right now. My episodes weren't as frequent anymore with the sheer amount of torture sessions I dished out and subjected myself to. Things were under control; *I* was under control.

Focusing my attention back on Phoenix Romero, I watched her struggling to keep her sister upright, refusing to let go as Amon attempted to tug Reina away.

"Let Amon take her. He'll keep her safe," I spoke slowly and clearly, her eyes lowering to my lips to read them, and fuck if that didn't make my cock twitch. I dug my nails into my hands, fighting the urge to touch her skin. I bet she was soft and smelled like spring rain.

Then her eyes narrowed and she flipped me off.

Taken aback by her response, I worried maybe the girl had misread my lips. Although, she was staring at them rather intensely.

I pulled out my phone from my pocket and handed it to her.

"Here. Type." I wasn't ready to reveal to her that I knew some ASL.

Her eyes flitted to the phone, then back to me, a grimace still marring her face. She turned to look at her sister in Amon's arms, but Reina chose that moment to gag, spurring him into action.

"You two figure it out. I'm taking her into the office."

I watched them disappear through the crowd before returning my attention to Phoenix. I flinched when I took in her expression. Icy blue glare filled with hate, chin jutted out. The girl stared at me like I'd killed her favorite pet.

Unfortunately, my cock liked it. Liked *her*. A lot.

And that was saying something, because my cock didn't like much of anything these days. How… *interesting*.

I slowly circled around her stiff body, my eyes roaming the smooth skin of her décolleté and arms. Fuck, she was exquisite, but also strong. Soft and tough.

Dandelion.

I had no idea where it came from, but it fit her perfectly. Mother said the flower symbolized hope, healing, and resilience, but there was a legend which stated that if you could blow all the seeds off a dandelion with a single breath, then the person you loved would love you back. Mother had never parted with that romantic side of herself despite the horrors she faced in life. Some of it stuck.

And then there was her name. Phoenix. Risen from ashes. Wild and beautiful. Could she be tamed? I shook my head, chasing the ridiculous thoughts away.

Phoenix's face was still turned on me, her expression contorted with anger. Jesus, what had I done to this girl to end up on her shit list?

"Type," I demanded, which seemed to only piss her off more. The spark behind her blue eyes roared to life when I mouthed, "What's your problem?"

She yanked my phone from my hand and pounded on the screen. It was a good thing I had a screen protector or she'd have fucking cracked it with the force.

> WHERE DO I START? THE LIST'S SO LONG IT WOULD TAKE ME A WHOLE DAY JUST TO TYPE IT UP.

I laughed, then mouthed clearly so she could read my lips. "Then give me the first problem on the list."

The music still drummed around us, but somehow it felt as if the world didn't exist. Only her.

> YOU.

I was taken aback by her directness and hate in her eyes. What. The. Fuck. I barely knew her, and yet she already couldn't stand me?

"Why?" I demanded. You couldn't just have a problem with me without offering an explanation. *Especially* when my cock had refused to soften since I'd spotted her. "If it doesn't offend you to explain, oh great Nix."

I didn’t know where that nickname had come from, but it rolled right off my tongue. I couldn’t help but think *Nix* suited her like a glove. It meant *night* in Greek, and somehow I sensed this girl embraced her darkness.

Blue lightning flashed in her eyes—angry and cold—before she started typing again like she had a vendetta against my phone. While she went at it, I admired the lines of her graceful neck. It was fragile and delicate—breakable. I could snuff the light right out of her, and the thought made something tighten in my throat.

She handed me the phone, cutting off my train of thought, then turned on her heel and stomped away. Stunned, I lowered my eyes to read the message.

> STAY THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME OR I’LL PUT YOU THROUGH HELL. I WON’T JUST STOP AT MURDER, AND I WON’T MAKE IT PLEASANT.

My eyebrows shot up and I raised my head, catching a glimpse of her swaying her hips and flipping her thick mane before she disappeared from my view.

If I were sane, I would keep my distance. But I wasn’t.

So like the devil that I was, I started feeding the flicker of fire that had awakened in me. I’d burn with this girl, and together we’d create the most magnificent hell.

My lips curved into a smile. “Hell is my home, dandelion. Bring it the fuck on.”

She wanted my attention, and now she had it.

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THREE

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PHOENIX

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20 YEARS OLD

Nix.

He behaved as if we had no history and then dared to call me Nix. *How dare he?*

I wanted to scream and rage, let my voice be heard, which was something I never did. I was too self-conscious about the sound of my voice since I could no longer hear it for myself. In fact, I could count on one hand the number of people who'd ever heard my voice, and this monster was one of them.

Dante was the only one who'd ever abbreviated the name, and while I'd gushed over it once upon a time, now I wanted to murder him for it. Make him regret ever giving it to me.

And if he ever dared mention a dandelion, I might really lose my shit. The memories were too painful and I'd rather not think about them. Yet, his words pushed through.

You are light and darkness in perfect balance, Nix. They were the same words he'd spoken two years ago. Then, when I needed him the most, he wasn't fucking there.

I never wore the necklace he gave me with the promise ring and the emergency device. Not anymore. I wiped every piece of evidence of him from my life when I gave birth. Because really, what was the point?

I didn't want any reminders of him. He failed me. He failed *us*.

Following the incident in the club, Amon Leone insisted on taking us all home. So here I was, stuck in Dante's car. If only I could have avoided this tortuous ride.

The twenty minutes in the car with Dante Leone felt like a fucking lifetime, and I was certain it shed me of some good years.

Why didn't I insist on riding with Amon, Isla, and Reina? I should have demanded it. After all, I was her sister. Instead, I was stuck in the back seat of Dante's slick Audi, suffocating from the intensity radiating off him.

Thankfully, I avoided the front seat. Poor Raven wasn't so lucky.

The moment she tried to slide back here after Athena, he barked for her to sit in the front. Athena was nice enough to translate, although it wasn't hard to read his lips or sense his anger.

"I'm not your fucking Uber driver," was what he said.

The exasperated look Raven shot me almost had me sparing her that torture. *Almost.* But I wasn't that brave, and self-preservation prevailed. I pressed myself back into the cool leather, trying to get as far away from him as I could, praying for a short ride.

Oh how things had changed! Two years ago, all I wished for was longer drives and more time with him. I couldn't get enough.

"How fast can this thing go?"

"As fast as you want." He looked at me when he mouthed the words so I could read them, and I imagined his voice would feel like the softest caress against my heated skin. The sunset in the distance as we sped down the Pacific Coast Highway was breathtaking, but it had nothing on him.

"I want you to go fast, but I also want more time with you." My cheeks heated at the admission, but the truth was boys hadn't shown interest in me. I'd only experienced one chaste kiss on the cheek here and there, nothing more. I felt like the oldest virgin on the planet. Until I crossed paths with Dante a few weeks back at a New Years Eve party in Los Angeles. Now, much to my delight, chaste *and* virginity *were words that flew out the window.*

Chaste and Dante Leone in the same country, never mind sentence, didn't marry. Neither did our families. The Romeros and Leones were reluctant business partners, but it wasn't hard to figure out that Papà didn't like them.

My age didn't help. I wasn't quite eighteen yet—though thanks to my fake ID, Dante believed me to be of legal age.

"We can go all night, Nix." Gosh, when he said things like that, my body flared with lust. I ached for him, my desire for him growing stronger every day. "How fast do you want to go?"

“Fast,” I mouthed and signed out of habit. I’d noticed that he’d downloaded an ASL app, but he hadn’t said anything, so I didn’t either. With the top down on his black Audi convertible, the air caressed my cheeks and whipped my hair around my shoulders as he pushed on the gas pedal. “I want to touch you.”

The glance he cast my way was nothing but heat. My pulse fluttered, and the pressure between my legs built with each mile behind us.

In the next heartbeat, the car accelerated, pushing me back against my seat. A spark passed his eyes as he glanced my way again, then returned his attention to the road. He was going fast, his odometer hitting 80… 90… 100 mph.

Adrenaline surged through my veins in anticipation. Maybe he wanted me as much as I craved him. The past weeks since we’d crossed paths had been magnificent. I was high on the emotions he pulled from me. I was high on him.

He felt right, like the missing part of me I’d been searching for. Breathing his air and touching him felt like playing the piano. Actually, no, it was even better. The keys were cold and under my command; he was anything but. His skin was hot, and the darkness in his soul spoke to mine, but it was his vehemence that intoxicated me.

In my eyes, he was perfect.

The car slowed down, but the adrenaline and lust didn’t ebb. Once he pulled over, he turned the ignition off, and the feel of the engine’s soft crackles mirrored the ones sparking through my body. The heavy tension. The sunset sky. The hot air.

My breaths were labored as I waited. I wanted this man with every ounce of me, and every time I was near him, my control and guard melted away, surrendering to him. I wanted him to have it all.

Our gazes met, his dark and possessive. Mine submissive. I wanted to please him, feel owned by him.

His attention dropped down my body as he unbuckled his seat belt, then reached over and unclipped mine. Without any hesitation, I climbed over the console to straddle him, luxuriating in the pressure of his hands on my hips as he gripped the flesh and marked me.

His hands pushed my dress up my thighs while he watched me lazily, his head tilted back to lean against the headrest. I explored his chest, his neck, my fingers sinking into his thick dark hair and settling behind his nape.

“I like you in a dress.” He always made sure he met my eyes when he spoke, but it was his next action that made me free-fall. His hands left my thighs and he signed, “I love you, Nix. My dandelion.” His strong fingers moved gracefully as he uttered the words he seemed to have rehearsed.

My heart stumbled before it surged up into the air only to come back down and go to him, leaving me permanently.

I leaned forward, peppering kisses over his mouth and his jaw and his neck, then carved a path back to his lips and released a sigh. His hand splayed across my throat, pushing me back as he brushed a thumb over my pulse point. His expression was dark and possessive. “I want your forever.”

Little did he know he already had my past, present, and future. All of it. I was put on this earth for him and him alone.

“You have it,” I signed, mouthing the words at the same time. “I love you too.”

Then he pressed his mouth to mine. He kissed me, lazy and sweet, but it didn’t last long before it turned rough and possessive. His tongue slid into my mouth, sucking and nipping. When he pulled back with a long, deep lick, shudders coursed through me.

I watched his rough hands find their way down my breasts, the raised skin beneath my dress, the curve of my waist. He fisted the string of my thong before ripping the material clean off, baring me to his burning gaze.

He cupped my pussy with one hand while his other took my chin, his fingers tipping my face up and lifting my eyes to his.

“Mine.”

My breathing turned shallow, but I wasn’t scared. In fact, I loved him like this. He owned me, and something about his claim brought a rush of raw feelings to the forefront. Sometimes I wished I had a voice and my hearing, but in these moments, with Dante, I didn’t feel less than. I felt right, enough.

“Always,” I mouthed soundlessly.

A groan vibrated beneath my fingers as he kissed me with a burning passion. Slipping his tongue into my mouth, pulling my bottom lip between his teeth… He made me feel alive.

I tugged on his T-shirt, then slid my hand over his muscular stomach, running my fingers along the grooves in his abs and the planes of his chest. My fingers traveled over his skin that always seemed to run hotter than

anything else I'd touched, and the rush of lust pooled in my lower belly, making my sweet spot throb with an aching need.

I shifted, grinding against his erection, my hips rocking in the dance that had been performed for thousands of years. I was burning on the inside, and with each rub against his bulge behind his jeans, the fire grew hotter and brighter.

I closed my eyes, so close to unraveling I shook with the intensity of it.

He yanked my head back and gripped my hair, pressing his mouth against mine once more before meeting my eyes.

"Take me out and put me inside you." A shaky breath escaped me, my eyes half-lidded as I hovered over him, pulsating. Dante had a dirty mouth on him. I never thought it'd be so hot to have a man order me around like that, but I whimpered, writhed, and moaned every time he did. "Fuck, when you make those noises," he mouthed, watching me with an all-consuming stare. His grip on my hair tightened. "Hurry up, my dandelion, or I'll have to punish you."

God, but his punishments were not punishments at all. They got me hot and bothered, never failing to bring the most earth-shattering releases.

I worked on his belt buckle, pulling him out. He was hot and heavy, smooth and hard in my hand as I pumped him in my fist once, twice. I felt his growl where I straddled him.

His fingers dug into my hips and I poised the tip of him at my entrance. The heat of him against my throbbing pussy had my insides clenching greedily.

I slowly rocked, letting the top of his arousal slide inside my slickness only to lift my hips again. Then I repeated the motion—one, two, three times—the shallow pumps making my muscles tremble. God, he felt delicious.

He trailed a finger along my collarbone, pushing one strap, then the other off my shoulders, tugging my dress down to my breasts. His look was possessive as he yanked the cups of my bra aside to reveal my breasts, then captured a nipple in his mouth.

I lowered myself down onto his length, sinking only halfway. His hand released my hair to squeeze my other breast while he continued to lick, nip, and suck. My eyes rolled to the back of my head, my pulse quivering around him.

I panted, my thighs squeezing as I continued making small circles. He was so big, it felt like the first time each time he entered me.

His grip tightened on my hips, and I rested my hands on top of his, gripping his fingers. For strength or to stop him, I didn't know.

I watched his head tip back, creasing the leather, and the emotion in his eyes shot straight to my core.

"Take the rest of my cock," he commanded while I stared at his mouth, trying to read his lips and process the words. "We both know your pussy wants to be fucked. I can feel your arousal dripping down your legs. You'll take all of it, and then you'll scream for me."

I shuddered, a moan tearing from my lips. The things his filthy words did to me.

One of his hands slipped out from my hold and came between our bodies, finding my clit. He circled it, my arousal drenching his fingers.

We both looked down at where we were connected and I slid down, taking him all the way inside me as I shuddered. Every muscle in his body was pulled taut. The hot buzz shot through my veins, feeling Dante's vibrations rippling through me. I knew only he could control my body and my pleasure. Forever. All my orgasms belonged to him.

Our heartbeats raced together. His hips moved so my clit would grind against him, making me shudder with the intensity. His hands were all over me, touching me, owning me, grabbing fistfuls of my hair to angle my head while he kissed me, his other hand gripping my hip to grind me harder against him.

It took hardly any time for me to explode. I felt heat travel up my throat. It had to be my voice. I orgasmed so hard, spots flew behind my eyelids. The fire spread through me like a warm, tingling sensation.

A rough nip at my earlobe had me opening my eyes to meet my lover's pools of want. He looked pleased, and I melted for him.

"Give me another," he demanded as if my orgasms were his rewards.

"Fuck me, Dante," I mouthed, reaching back to rest both hands on his knees.

His gaze bled into a liquid blue flame as he gripped my hips and began bouncing me on his erection. Rough. Fast. Hard. His eyes trailed over my bare skin, my bouncing breasts, my stomach to where he slid in and out of me.

My arousal glistened, the evidence of my desire coating his skin. Pleasure hummed beneath my skin.

He suddenly stilled me, then brought his fingers to my clit. He swept over the arousal, and I watched unabashedly as he brought them to his mouth and sucked on it, his eyelids closing for a moment with a blissful expression.

His deep blue eyes opened and he repeated the motion, but this time he rubbed the wetness over my bottom lip. I darted my tongue out, licking the tip of his finger and tasting myself.

His control snapped. He gripped my hips, pulling us chest to chest, and bounced me on his erection. Hard. Fast. My hands came to his shoulders, my fingers clawing his skin and holding on to him while he consumed me.

Up and down. Each thrust devastated, promising pleasure that would wreck me in the best possible way. He didn't ease up, giving me his all while he held me over him and pounded into me.

My throat trembled, his grunts vibrated under my palms.

I climaxed for the second time while Dante took my mouth, swallowing all my pants and coarse breaths. My walls clenched around his length as he thrust again and again until he shuddered, finishing inside me.

I rested my face in the crook of his neck, an easy smile teasing my lips.

Our hot breaths. His mouth on my skin. Languid, post-coital bliss.

I loved going on those drives with him. I had fallen deeply and irrevocably in love with him. I never forgot a single moment we shared or a word he spoke. Yet, when his eyes landed on me in the club, he looked at me as though I was a stranger to him. Almost as if he'd forgotten me completely. All the while, he'd once been *everything* to me.

He destroyed me, and I had to live with the consequences and memories haunting my every waking and sleeping hour.

I scoffed softly, remembering all his sweet promises—his *lies*. I was the fool who believed him. I was the fool who'd hoped, and he'd fed my dreams, at least until he smashed them all to pieces.

Everyone's eyes shifted to me and I realized I must have made a louder noise than intended.

"Everything okay?" Athena asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

I nodded despite nothing being fucking *okay*. The fucker didn't even recognize me. I'd been dying a little each day since he'd walked away, and he couldn't even give me the courtesy of acknowledging me.

I'd been careful not to run into him for two whole years, avoiding being in his presence at all costs. But it was impossible to deny how different he

was now, no matter how long it'd been. He had a volatile edge that he didn't even attempt to conceal. Simmering anger rippled off him, setting even Raven on edge.

Dante might have changed, but his effect hadn't. Wood and leather emanated from him, smothering me along with the heat of him as I stared out the window, watching the city's lamplights drift by. The man was hot-blooded in more ways than one.

Our eyes met for a flicker of a second in the rearview mirror, and I fought the urge to avert mine. Instead, I held fast. I wanted him to see my hate. Anger might be what drove Dante these days, but it was no match for *my* fucking fury.

My heart was pounding aggressively, but I paid it no mind—it was just an organ. It refused to feel, to love, and, most aggravatingly, to move on. The only piece of it that could be salvaged was taken from me, along with my baby.

Dante seduced me with his devious behavior, then left me to bear the consequences all alone. I hated him. *You still love him*, my broken heart whispered. *No*. I wouldn't acknowledge it—*couldn't* acknowledge it. My heart was what got me into this mess in the first place. Well… my heart and the absence of a condom, but there was no sense in getting lost in the details.

My eyes caught a glimpse of his large and veiny hands on the steering wheel. The same ones that had touched me, owned me. The way he used to let his raw gaze travel over me and create a delicious friction was one thing, but when he finally put those destructive hands on me? My body would detonate. It had become an addiction and something I hadn't been able to replicate. Not that I had any interest in doing so.

He returned his eyes to the road, but I still sensed his attention on me in every other way.

Exhaling softly, I closed my eyes, chasing the images of us away. If I had the chance, I'd wipe them from my mind.

Remember the pain, the agony he left you in, I reminded myself. He used me, and I've never believed in second chances. History wouldn't be repeated. I was done being used. I had friends and family who loved and accepted me. I didn't need him anymore.

The time when I needed him had passed.

The car came to a stop and the three of us girls jumped out of it like ghosts were chasing us.

I rushed to Amon who had Reina scooped up in his arms, her head hanging loosely and her mouth slightly parted.

"*Did you check her pulse?*" I signed urgently to Isla. Raven and Athena were already in the building, calling the elevator. "*Did she wake up at all?*"

"She was in and out, but mostly out," Isla answered. Her eyes flicked over my shoulder and I realized Dante was out of his car, leaning against it and watching our exchange with interest. I narrowed my eyes on him as if to say *What the fuck do you want*, but the dumbass didn't get the message. "Anyhow, she'll be fine. Just needs to get some sleep and let that shit flush out of her system."

Her eyes darted to Dante, then back to me, and she bolted inside, almost as if she could sense the impending volcanic eruption.

"*You cannot come upstairs*," I signed, my stubbornness keeping me from mouthing the words. Why should I make it easy for him?

"As if you could stop me."

My mouth parted in shock as I watched his hands sign the words. He'd learned ASL? It was the last thing I expected, and the smirk on his fucking face told me he was pleased with my reaction. He'd made me type on his phone before… Why hadn't he used ASL to begin with?

Aside from the probability of him being an ass, of course. He was infuriating.

I took a moment to slide over Dante's impressive build with fresh eyes. Two years ago, he always opted for jeans and a leather jacket. Today, he wore a custom Italian suit that hugged his muscles and promised mouthwatering abs. The darkness that had lurked under his skin then was now out in the open—in every look, every smile, every move. He was proud of it, and it was scary as fuck.

Yet, I refused to cower.

I clenched my jaw, scolding myself for even noticing his body. I didn't fucking care if he was proclaimed a saint, he'd always be the devil to me.

"*Step a single foot in my apartment and I'll kill you*," I signed.

Then I turned my back to him for the second time that evening and walked away without another glance. Let him get a taste of his own medicine.

I started to climb the stairs to our apartment, needing to burn off some of this anger, when I ran into Amon. His step faltered, his attention on me.

“I put her on the couch. She’ll need to drink a lot of water.” He spoke slowly, even throwing an ASL sign for drink and water in there to be sure I understood. I’d be impressed if not for his relation to Dante Leone.

I nodded, then brushed past him to get to my sister.

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FOUR

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PHOENIX

I sat on the couch with my sister sleeping next to me and my girlfriends sprawled on the living room floor of our little Parisian apartment. I was… perturbed. My skin buzzed with an electricity I hadn't felt in two years.

Since I'd last felt his touch.

I couldn't erase the look Dante gave me in the club from my mind. Vehement and lustful, but there was something else there too.

He acted like he didn't even know me. Almost as if he was disturbed by seeing me.

How dare he choose the coward's way out and pretend what we had could be easily dismissed! I choked on my fury, fighting the urge to reach out and punch him. Hit him. Scratch him. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to make him feel what I'd felt two years ago.

A ray of light from the streetlamp poured through the window and I let my mind wander back into the past, to that naive girl who blindly fell for Dante Leone.

I wasn't alone.

Somehow, someway, my heart insisted he'd come through. He said it'd be the three of us, dancing through life together. Right?

Except, self-doubt was a bitch. Slowly, day by fucking day, I started to question it all. Every kiss. Every promise. Every goddamned thing.

My chest constricted as I wiped my tearstained face with the back of my hand.

It had been months—seven months, one week, and five days to be exact —since I'd seen or heard from him.

My heart kept whispering, "He's coming. Just hang in there, he's coming. He promised he'd always come."

Well, then where was he?

I called him. I texted him. I paged him using our 911 code.

Click. Click. Click.

I checked my phone again. Only a text from my sister and friends. Reina missed me; she was worried about me. She kept questioning me on what the doctors were saying, and I didn't like lying to her.

My phone vibrated again.

Can we FaceTime? I miss you.

I FaceTimed Reina right before I took a nap, but I didn't want to talk to her again yet. I missed her too, but lying to her via camera was harder than via text. So I closed the message and started pacing around the room.

There wasn't much to do. It was too cold to go outside, the December temperatures here low enough to freeze you down to the bone. Growing up in California, the only time we experienced snow was when we sought it out, which wasn't very often.

I had made it only a month into my first year of college in Paris when I had to take sick leave. Grandma used her Hollywood fame and influence with the dean to keep me from getting kicked out. She even got the chancellor to grant me permission to take classes online.

My days since Grandma brought me to this clinic, after making up some elaborate story that required seclusion, were filled with texting and FaceTiming my sister and friends and working on my studies.

She was so convincing that everyone had bought it, even Papà.

I'd have gone mad without my course modules. There would still be catching up to do once I was back, but Grandma made it clear I wouldn't be leaving with a baby in my arms.

But still, I hoped. And still, I wished.

I kept bringing up my desire to keep the baby, although I was terrified. I'd never even so much as held a baby, I'd never even changed a diaper before. I knew nothing about them.

"You're too irresponsible. You disgraced yourself and our family." Grandma repeated it over and over again. Her actual words were that she'd leave me penniless so I'd get a taste of real life. It was heartless, but she'd called it tough love.

If that happened, my baby would starve. I couldn't do that to my child. It'd be cruel and selfish.

I slid off the hospital bed slowly, gripping my back with one hand while rubbing my big belly with the other. I slipped my feet into the hospital slippers and wobbled to the window, staring at the same view I had been for the past three months. As soon as my bump became too noticeable to conceal, Grandma whisked me to this facility without another word.

Except now, snow blanketed the grounds, making it almost painful to look at, hiding any hint of color for as far as the eye could see. Reminding me of the seasons changing without me.

Why wasn't he coming?

The ache in my heart felt like someone had sliced my heart and soul wide open, then left me to bleed out. The pain was raw, consuming me just like Dante had so many months ago.

My hand on my stomach, I felt the life move inside me. It'd be any day now.

I reached into the pocket of my maternity dress for the emergency device. This was definitely an appropriate time to use it.

Grandma refused to compromise; they would take the baby from me. Nobody else knew about the baby, and I couldn't pull my sister and friends into this. So I kept my secret to myself, although my lips burned to tell the world. Instead, all I told were lies.

I lowered my gaze to the small device, turning it over in my hands and studying it. It was meant to rescue me. Why was it failing?

Click. Breathe.

Click. He'd come for us.

Click. Time was running out.

I rubbed my belly, the pain unbearable. I wanted our baby to be happy, born surrounded with love, not shame.

"He'll come for us," I mouthed, my breath fogging up the glass, the hope in my heart dimming. "The three of us will be together."

My lungs tightened, constricting in my chest.

If only Reina were here, I thought for the millionth time. Grandma threatened she'd pull my college funds if I told her. She didn't want my sixteen-year-old sister tainted by my promiscuity. The only reason I agreed was because I didn't want to see my baby sister upset. She'd worked her ass

off, and the last thing I wanted to see was Grandma pull tuition funds from her too.

"Too young. Too stupid. Too blind." Grandma's words from earlier filled my skull and I hated that she was right. Fucking. Hated. It. "You and Reina are supposed to break the cycle," she'd spat, frustration coloring her face. "Will we ever end this cycle of out-of-wedlock children?"

Her rant went on and on for the entire duration of the flight over the Atlantic. It made me remember Mamma and their arguments. A strangled garble of protest escaped my lips, and I was back to being five years old again.

"Worthless. Disgrace." I still remembered the way turmoil flickered through Mamma's gaze at Grandma's harsh words. The way tears filled her eyes. Those were some of the last words I ever heard spoken before my illness took over.

Before the world turned silent.

I startled awake with perspiration on my temples, an ache in my heart, and a body cuddled close to me.

Reina slept soundly in my arms, the drugs leaving her system. I still couldn't believe she was roofied. It could have ended a lot worse than it did, and although I knew it wasn't fair of me, I blamed the Leone brothers for it.

They should screen their people better. They should have more bouncers in the club so women weren't at risk of being taken advantage of. I smile for the first time since last night just thinking about how Raven showed that fucker. She smashed his skull with her beer bottle, and he probably wouldn't be able to function properly for the foreseeable future.

Assuming Amon Leone hadn't killed him.

No complaints from me. Let the motherfucker die.

Reina stirred in my arms, her curls sprawled over my legs and arm, and I focused on what I had.

Family. Friends. Music.

That was all I needed. For now. I knew there was something—some*one*—missing, and I'd go looking one day. For the little life that I grew underneath my heart that was torn from me without so much as a hello or goodbye.

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FIVE

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DANTE

People annoyed the fuck out of me.

There were only a few rare exceptions—Amon, Mother, and… Well, that was it. Although I suspected Phoenix, the fiery Nix, might become part of that group too. Despite her rude and thorny attitude. It must be a souvenir from her home in California. She opted for the desert of Death Valley while her sister went for the sun, thriving on light and rainbows.

Give me a cactus anytime. They were tough. Resilient. And fuck, I was always up for a challenge.

It had been a week since seeing Phoenix Romero in the club, and the more I watched her from the shadows, the more I was intrigued. Her sister was simple, but not Nix. She had layers of herself she was hiding from the world. I wanted to unwrap her and figure out what made her tick. She captivated me in ways nobody else ever had.

I pulled into the parking space, then dismounted from my motorcycle and hung my helmet over the handle. I stood in front of the old castle in the French countryside outside Paris. The only light provided was by the moon since it was one of my properties that had yet to be remodeled. I purchased it recently, and renovations would soon start before it was turned into a casino.

“Look who I found!” Ghost emerged from the trees, dragging a pretty blond guy struggling and floundering like a slippery, slimy leech. He was outfitted in jeans and a leather jacket. “I already got his tooth too.”

Ghost had a serious fixation with teeth. I didn’t know the history behind it, but what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t support it?

I grinned. “I can’t wait to see your collection one day.”

He shot me a wry look. “Keep dreaming.”

“I totally will.” I looked past him, searching for his vehicle. “How did you get here?”

He lifted his shoulder. “I parked on the main road. Felt like dragging him a bit.”

An incredulous breath left me. I could admit I wasn’t all that right in the head, but I had nothing on Ghost. Maybe that was the reason we got along so great.

The blond guy’s eyes darted between us, blood trickling down his chin, when Ghost threw him on the ground in front of me like a sack of potatoes. “You two are crazy!”

“Ahhh, he’s so nice.” He’d barely gotten a preview. The ballet dancer was part of the assembly that joined Phoenix’s orchestra. Apparently, it was a requirement of her college class.

Ghost shrugged. “He could try a bit harder.”

I met the blond’s eyes. For a ballet dancer, he had some bulky muscles on him. Too bad his attitude still sucked. I’d been familiarizing myself with Phoenix’s patterns—okay, okay, I was stalking her at the opera house during her rehearsals—when I caught this fucker pushing her around, getting handsy with her. Then he and his buddies made jokes at her expense, dismissing the music she produced with her graceful fingers. I wasn’t much for Beethoven, Mozart, or classical music in general, but her notes struck somewhere deep inside me. The world, including this fucking guy, would appreciate her music…or else.

Needless to say, the blond prick had to pay for his disrespect.

Once Phoenix was out of sight, I went after him, but we got interrupted by a group of passersby, and like a scared cat, this fucker bolted. So, I solicited Ghost’s skills that rivaled those of a bloodhound. He could find and track down anyone. *Fucking anyone.*

He attempted to claw at Ghost, then me, and I choked out a laugh.

“What’s your name?”

His body shook, but to his credit, he met my eyes. “Erik Costa.”

“Do you know why you’re here, *Erik Costa*?” He started to struggle again and I punched him in the face, my patience wearing thin. His face hit the ground, causing him to literally eat dirt. “I hear you’re a dancer, so unless you want me to break your legs, stop pissing me off.”

Ghost sat on his back, shoving his face into the dirt. “I don’t have all night,” he spat.

“I don’t have a fucking clue why I’m here. This guy cornered me and pulled my tooth, threatening to chop my tongue off for no reason.”

I kicked him in the ribs. “There is a reason,” I gritted. “Everything I do is for a reason, and you, fucker, have been seen making fun of a deaf girl.”

I didn’t question my disdain at this or how my chest squeezed when I saw the look on Phoenix's face when she noticed the guys making fun of her.

For that, I kicked him again. He’d be out of commission once I was done with him.

“Fucker,” he coughed.

So I punched him again and again.

My anger simmered through my veins. I shouldn’t be teetering on the edge, not after killing Roberto, the guy who slipped a roofie to Reina. But I was ready to explode, and I had no doubt that making it so this fucker’s face was unrecognizable would take the edge off.

Ghost got up off the guy’s back, then leaned back against the tree, folding his arms while I went *berserk*. He tapped his pocket and retrieved a smoke.

“Let me try to help you.” Ghost, who was watching the whole scene with unabashed excitement, flicked the ashes of his cigarette on the ground. “You should never piss off Dante. You might want to show some manners and apologize for being an ass to his girl.”

My girl.

In the dark corner of my mind, shadows whispered. *Take her. Make her yours. She* is *yours.*

Fuck, I had to keep my shit together. It never boded well for anyone when I was agitated or stressed. I had to keep my rage in check before shit hit the fan.

As if sensing the anger rolling off me, Erik lifted his head, eyeing me warily. He got up on all fours, his face and eyes swollen. He released a muffled groan, then mumbled something I had to lean in to hear.

“Fuck… you… and your mute… deaf… stupid… girl…”

I kicked him in the ribs, relishing his grunt full of pain. “She’s not mute, you asshole. She lost her hearing. It’s two different things.”

How did I know? I looked it up, and so should this fucker.

He spat blood. “Whatever.”

Ghost snickered. “You’re pretty ballsy.”

“But not very smart and certainly not nice. Did Mamma not teach you that bullying is wrong?” I swung my hand through the air and drove it straight into his cheek. He fell to the ground, motionless, his body sprawled at an awkward angle.

“Maybe we can pull out all his teeth and burn his eyeballs,” I stated pensively, flicking a dark look at Ghost. “You up for making this guy toothless?”

Something savage passed Ghost’s expression, but before he could answer, our blond friend whimpered, his eyes wide with fear. “No, no. Please.”

I shared a look with Ghost, letting my lips curve into a menacing grin.

“How about you explain why you mocked my girl and tell me how you’re going to make it up to her, and I’ll consider letting you live to see another day.”

“I… she…” He strained to speak, but I didn’t give two shits. “I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.”

Phoenix Romero didn’t have a boyfriend. If she did, he’d be dead. Why? Because she felt like mine. Because my cock responded to her and nobody else. That had to count for something. It was a fucking sign.

“She doesn’t know it yet, but she’s…” I trailed off, the corners of my lips tugging up. “But she’s unavailable for anyone else.”

Shock flared on his face. “You… You’re crazy.”

He had no fucking idea.

I kicked him before reaching for my own cigarette, lighting it, then putting it in my mouth and letting it hang loosely. I never used to smoke, not until two years ago, and since then, it’d become a habit.

“My time is valuable.” Correction: I wanted to go see my woman before hitting the sheets. “Let us hear it.”

“H-hear what?” he stuttered.

“He’s not very bright,” I remarked wryly.

Ghost grinned, blowing out a cloud of smoke. “Maybe he wants to have some dental work done.”

“It sure sounds like it,” I said matter-of-factly, taking a step, ready to smash his mouth.

“She refused me,” Erik screamed, desperate now.

I stiffened, certain that I heard him wrong. “What did you say?”

I kid you not, he started crying. “Sh-she didn’t want to go on a date,” he grunted, his voice muffled.

That was *my* girl. Who was this fucker to think she would ever consider going on a date with him?

“Are you telling me you asked her on a date and she refused you, so you started mocking her?” Ghost’s voice was eerily calm while a tsunami whipped through me, pounding words in my skull. *Kill, kill, kill.*

He nodded, crying even harder, like a little girl who just saw the boogeyman. He had no fucking idea what he’d unleashed. “I—I’m sorry.”

“I think I’m going to kill him,” I drawled, fury boiling in my blood. The blond stared at me with bulging eyes, but he wasn’t nearly as scared as he should be.

My knuckles burned with each punch to his pretty face. It matched the burning in my lungs that had nothing to do with the smoking habit I’d developed. Ever since my… kidnapping, my temper had been more volatile and harder to control. My brother helped, leashing my violent outbursts by recognizing when I needed a release and pulling me back when he needed to.

If he’d left me to my own devices in those early days, I would be on death row—or just straight up dead.

“Dante.” Ghost’s voice barely registered through the buzzing in my brain. “Dante!” I blinked and found Ghost staring at me, my own reflection staring back at me in his dark eyes. Unhinged. Hungry for violence. Deranged. “You good?”

“Yes.” *Not really*. But it didn’t matter. Nix was the only thing that mattered here. I would stop this guy and his friends from bullying her.

“If you say so.” Ghost didn’t believe me. No surprise there. He would recognize a fucked-up person from miles away. After all, it took one to know one.

Sometimes I wondered if any amount of violence would ever satisfy this thirst. When I picked up these new habits after the kidnapping, I made Amon promise not to let me slip out of control. Whenever blood saturated my vision, I’d lose my head, and then death and destruction followed.

I focused on the blond prick at my feet. His face was bruised up, blood staining its features that were no longer as pretty.

“You won’t be using sleazy methods to handle a woman’s rejection anymore. Be a man and accept that she doesn’t want you.” He nodded so eagerly I thought he’d give himself whiplash. “Don’t. Fucking. Mock. Her. Again.”

“I won’t. And I won’t touch her again.”

“And tomorrow, you’re going to apologize to Nix—” He gave me a blank look. “To *Phoenix*, and you’ll tell everyone you got to join you on this bullying kick that you’re a fucking moron and a douche. You’re going to tell them she is a muse—my muse—and nobody can touch her. If anyone so much as looks at her wrong, I’m coming for them. *Capisce*?”

He blinked, confused. No acknowledgement. Just silence.

Ghost came over and kicked the guy in the ribs. “Now is the time to say *yes* and never fuck up again.”

“No second chances, Erik.” I yanked him up to his feet, grabbing him by his shirt. “Use words. I’m not a fucking mind reader.”

“O-okay. I promise, I’ll make it right.”

“Damn straight you will.” Denying me was never an option. “Now get lost.”

“O-okay,” Erik stuttered. He stood, his eyes darting from me to Ghost, then back to me.

“What?” I snapped, annoyed he was still standing here. “Want to die after all?”

“Who’s going to drive me back?”

Ghost snickered. “You’re going to walk, motherfucker.”

Erik didn’t like it, but he staggered away, stumbling and holding his arm at a weird angle. He might not be able to dance tomorrow or next week, but if he followed through and kept away from Phoenix, he’d be able to one day.

“Does your father know you’re playing stalker?” Ghost asked, pulling my attention to him.

Searing fury shot through my veins. The anger was strong enough that I had to choke it down. It burned in my throat, in my chest, marring my vision with a red mist. *Father.* The fucker was only a seed donor. A parent didn’t abandon his child when he needed him, leaving him to his enemy. A parent didn’t beat his children to make them *stronger.* A parent didn’t destroy his children.

I shook my head, forcing myself to inhale a deep breath before exhaling slowly. A clear head was imperative.

“No, and he won’t,” I answered, extinguishing my cigarette and reaching for the helmet on my bike.

He tilted his head, studying me for a moment or two before he gave it a subtle shake. “I’m starting to wonder whether you’re an adrenaline junkie or just plain crazy.”

“A little bit of both,” I said as I shoved my helmet in place. “Thank you for finding the fucker.”

“You’re getting the bill.”

Ghost was worth every penny. When someone was able to track down a person without even a name like he was, I learned they were more valuable than anyone else.

The engine of my bike revved and I hit the road. I had one more stop to make.

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SIX

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DANTE

I sped down the back roads, making my way to the heart of Paris where Phoenix and the girls rented an apartment. The location wasn't bad, but the company… I'd rather take a bullet in my skull than share an apartment with four girls.

That had to entail a lot of drama.

I watched her yesterday. And the day before. I'd been following her for a week now. I learned she loved her routine, her piano, and her Instagram posts. I wasn't big on any of the three, but in the past week, I'd had more of a routine than ever before.

The night after her sister got roofied, I hacked into Phoenix's phone. As ordinarily structured as her life seemed to be on the outside, her Instagram posts, apps, and sites she visited seemed that much more erratic.

She'd commemorated all her milestone moments—with her sister and friends often in them—on Instagram for the past six years. First concert. First birthday in Paris. First drunk night. First heartbreak.

When I saw that photo, I couldn't help but pause. A slick, black device and a diamond ring hung from a necklace. The device almost looked like the pager we used in the underworld. It was an odd thing for her to have. It couldn't be from her father. He kept his daughters out of the underworld.

I scrolled through the post. There were hundreds of comments asking what it was, but she didn't answer any of them. Yes, I actually went through all six hundred and thirty-five comments. None of them gave me any additional information on either item.

I wanted to know who gave her that ring. I *needed* the fucker's name so I could track him down and smack the shit out of him. He must have hurt

her badly. I could see it in her soulful blue eyes, especially when she thought nobody was looking.

I'd beat the fucking shit out of him. Of course, I'd never allow him to get her back. He missed his chance.

She's mine now.

I pictured the way her eyes would flash with anger if she knew what I was doing, and I wondered whether they'd flash that same way from desire too.

I shook my head as I picked up speed, frustrated at something I couldn't put my finger on. The girl didn't make any sense. *I* didn't make sense around her. My reaction to her piqued my curiosity, and I just couldn't keep away from her.

So I kept hacking into her devices, her phone, iPad and laptop, interested to learn all there was to know about Phoenix Romero. She was indeed a complicated human. The piano and classical music sites she visited weren't a surprise, neither were the blogs—ranging from fashion to food to travel.

I didn't expect to find a list of adoption agencies in upstate New York in her browser history. Was Nix looking into adopting? It made no sense. Then a locked folder caught my eye. It was in her Notes app and she'd titled it *Orgasm.* Surprise, surprise. Nix saved multiple articles on orgasms, aptly named, "What to Do if You're Struggling to Orgasm," and included notes on how psychotherapy could help address sexual needs. And she seemed up for anything, judging by the articles she saved.

My gut feeling warned she wouldn't be meek in the bedroom, and I found my lips curving with satisfaction at that thought. The good girl wasn't all that innocent after all.

I slowed down when I spotted the familiar building and searched for a spot to park my bike. *Bingo!* There was one right under the Juliet balcony. It took me no time at all to climb up the fire escape and find myself on the other side of the glass door. I'd pored over the apartment layout so that I now knew it by heart and could walk it blindfolded.

I passed Reina's spotless and very pink bedroom, keeping my footsteps light as I kept walking along the balcony. Then it was *her* room.

Phoenix Romero. Nix. The bane of my existence. The girl who had become the center of my world.

Except she wasn't in her room.

The glass door was cracked open, the scent of spring rain and something else thick in the air.

My gaze traveled over each corner of it. Her armoire left open, dresses of all colors and styles hanging. There were Post-it notes on random surfaces—the dresser, nightstand, even the mirror—with music notes drawn on them.

The door opened and I withdrew into the shadows just as she appeared, wearing red shorts and a white tank top. The door shut behind her quietly, and for a moment, she stood, unmoving, her eyes locked on where I stood outside her window.

My shoulders stiffened and I froze. She didn't move for a heartbeat—maybe three—almost as if she could sense me.

But then she walked over to her bed. She slid her shorts down her smooth, tanned thighs. Her tank top followed, and my breath caught in my throat as I observed her glorious body in nothing but her panties and bra. Curves. Smooth, pale skin.

A memory flickered. Too distant. Too hazy. *Catch me.*

I shook my head at the images flashing through my mind. Instead, I focused on the woman in front of me. The woman I wanted.

As if she heard my thoughts, her liquid blue eyes flickered to where I stood. Flipping her covers open, she lay down, her graceful back meeting the mattress.

People didn't often shock me. But this girl, she managed to do so at every turn.

Only a week had passed since our little run-in at the club, but since then, she was part of my every thought and every breath. Like an old memory that ingrained itself into my brain cells and refused to let go.

My eyes landed back on her slim figure, her dark hair sprawled over the pillow like a dark crown around her head. Her full lips were parted and her eyes were closed, a flush staining her cheeks.

I watched those graceful fingers drift to her breast, brushing against them as she let one hand follow the path over her flat stomach while her other pinched her nipple, causing her back to arch and her lips to part.

A small whimper reached me through the gap and my heart tripped over its own beat. It was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard. It was like a symphony that possessed your soul.

Her other hand slipped between her legs and I leaned closer, my hands gripping the sides of the window to force myself to remain in the shadows as I watched her masturbate. *Jesus Christ.* She was gorgeous.

She hid a fierceness underneath her cool exterior.

Most importantly, she was *mine* whether she fucking liked it or not. From now on, she'd do this for me and only me. Even if it killed me.

Her head thrown back and eyes closed, she reminded me of a virginal sacrifice for a sinner. Her inner thighs glistened as her legs parted and her hand dipped inside her panties, my mind conjuring all kinds of X-rated images of her pink pussy. The sheer curtain blew with the light breeze, blocking my view of her way too often.

But I couldn't grip the material out of fear that she'd notice me. So I let it flow back and forth, carrying the scent of her arousal through the air and making my mouth water.

Her back arched and a lock of hair spilled down her face. She panted, perspiration gathering above her lips that were begging to be taken in a bruising kiss.

God, look at her. How could I be expected to resist her?

Her body shuddered. Her hips rolled desperately, her tits bouncing as she spread her legs even wider. She begged to be fucked with my mouth, and damn it, I wanted to taste her. I ran my tongue across the back of my teeth, dying for a taste of her. I'd bet my life and everything I owned that she tasted like the sweetest oblivion.

The look of ecstasy on her face resembled the one she wore when she played music. Like she fucking thrived on it, riding on pleasure. She threw her head back and moaned as her pleasure climbed higher and higher until she orgasmed. The soft sound of her whimpers was so fucking sweet it sent shudders through me.

I dropped my eyes down her body. Taut tummy, toned thighs, tits in that sheer bra with nipples poking straight out against it that were made to be sucked. God, she looked like a goddess with the sweetest body I had ever seen. My fingers buzzed with the energy and something else that I couldn't quite place. Almost as if my hands remembered touching her—except I'd never touched her.

Then, to my shock, I realized my dick was hard. When was the last time my fucking dick responded like this? And to none other than Phoenix Romero. Fuck, she had to be the one.

My cock was so hard it throbbed against my jeans. I pictured myself stomping over there and sliding inside her. She'd be so fucking wet. I needed to know who she was thinking about when she touched herself.

Do it again, I chanted in my head, ready for a repeat. I wanted to see her unravel again. It was the most beautiful sight.

I raised my eyes to her face again, watching her eyebrows etched in pleasure and pain. I had never been big on kissing, but at this moment, I'd give my soul to kiss her just so I could taste the evidence of her exertion.

She relaxed on her side, pulling the covers up to her chin and tucking her knees up to her chest, closing her eyes as her breathing calmed. My temples throbbing, I tried to pull those earlier, foggier images to the forefront of my mind, but just like that, they all disappeared.

Phoenix's eyes opened and I receded further back into the dark. She stared off at nothing while I remained there, the fire in my body consuming me like an erupting volcano.

I inhaled a deep breath, feeling the silence of the night. I didn't move, watching her until she fell asleep.

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SEVEN

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PHOENIX

I’d sensed him stalking me ever since that night at his club.

Just when I started to wonder if it was all in my head, I spotted him in the shadows outside my balcony door when I entered my bedroom. He was getting sloppy. So, I decided to teach him a lesson.

At least that was what I told myself.

I feared examining the reasoning for why I did what I did any deeper. I blamed it on a temporary bout of insanity. Or maybe I just longed to feel *alive*. And I did, for a moment. My skin lit up knowing *he* was watching me.

Orgasms were always difficult to reach for me, but with his eyes on me, it didn’t take me long to get there. I felt his presence as if he were actually touching me. I moaned with each brush of my fingers against my skin, teasing my swollen folds. I writhed in bed, my heart drumming so loud I was sure he could hear it.

At some point, it stopped being a show for him and started being a raw need for me.

I should have known I was only fueling the fire. Yet, I continued, teasing my clit and thrusting a finger into my pussy until I was completely spent.

I wasn’t surprised he stayed. After all, he’d always been up for a challenge. I could almost picture his sharp features and dark presence, making him appear like a devil ready to pounce.

Ignoring my instinct to cower, I turned to the side, ensuring my breathing evened out. I waited. Let the fucker think I was asleep. Hopefully

the creep wouldn’t watch me sleep all night, because I really wanted to fuck with him.

Watching him through my lashes, I saw the dark shadow move, turning his back toward me. Without wasting any time, I reached for the handgun I had tucked in my nightstand and jumped to my feet, hoping I was as silent as my sister always claimed. I was at my balcony door in a heartbeat, yanking it open.

His hand was on the rail and he was ready to jump off. Too late. I had my gun pointed at his temple.

“What the fuck?” I watched him mouth as he slowly turned his head to me.

I grinned viciously, cocking my eyebrow. “*Ready to fly?*” I signed, struggling a bit since I only had one free hand. But there was nothing in this goddamn world that would make me put my gun down. “*Or want to die?*”

He watched me intently, his hand stroking the balcony in a slow rhythm. He let go of the rail and turned to fully face me, and suddenly, it felt like I was the prey. It didn’t matter that I held the gun, there was no doubt I was the vulnerable one here.

“That was a nice show you gave me,” he signed, a smirk lifting his lip. “How did you know I was watching?”

I ignored his question. “*Why are you following me*?”

He raised a brow. “Who says I am?”

His ASL was fucking good. Too good. Probably another trick. I pressed the barrel of the gun harder against his temple. “*Stop fucking with me*.”

His lips spread into a lazy smile, the one that I used to love. The one that I now hated.

“I wasn’t, but if this is an invitation, dandelion, I’m game.”

It was the stupidest nickname on this goddamn earth. Of course somehow it’d be given to me. *Damn him.* It reminded me of his grunts, of his body pressed against mine, the way his presence would fill my veins with enough heat and tension to set off fireworks. *He* was the reason I struggled to orgasm.

“*I’d rather be tortured than touch you.*”

He snatched my free hand and lifted it to his face, my gun still pressed to his temple. He sucked my fingers, still soaked with my arousal, into his mouth. His tongue swirled between them, licking, sucking, and I was ready to explode all over again.

I felt the vibration of his grunt or groan, I wasn't sure. His teeth scraped against my skin as he pulled them out of his mouth abruptly.

"I think you'd quite enjoy me touching you, Nix." I swallowed, reading his lips, my brain sending off so many conflicting signals. *Feel his hands on your skin. Back away. Let him fuck you. Push him off the balcony.*

I had to remove myself from his vicinity before I did something stupid.

Click. He never came back. *Click.* He left us. *Click.* He broke my heart.

I yanked my hand back, glaring at him while my cheeks burned. It was the last memory that had me taking a step back, the old bitterness and pain snaking through my veins.

Dante Leone was a liar and the devil reincarnate with gray—fuck, maybe even black—morals and a dangerous personality. I no longer wanted his attention. I hated him, and myself, for always having to wonder why he left and never came back.

So yes, I was done with him. I'd learned my lesson, and my curiosity about the dark, dangerous man had been sated, almost destroying me in the process.

"*Next time I see you stalking me, I am going to shoot you. Stay the fuck away from me and my sister*," I signed, then stepped back into my room without a backward glance, locking the door and drawing the thick curtains.

I was putting a stop to his stalker kink despite the longing I felt deep inside me.

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EIGHT

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DANTE

I didn’t know how long I stood at the side of her bed, observing her as she slept, her long lashes throwing shadows over her cheeks.

She was cute when she was angry. Even cuter when she threatened me. But when she slept, she looked completely uncorrupted. An angel of innocence that had fallen from grace and was battling her own inner demons and tempting mere mortals.

And freaks like me.

There were all kinds of freaks and sinners who would die to see her like this, sleeping with her bare thigh hanging off the bed. Her tank top bunched around her waist, giving me a torturous glimpse of her breast.

It was so tempting to lean in and bite the curve of her ass, but it would seem I had enough decency not to do that while currently being here, in her room, uninvited.

She thought she could order me around. So fucking cute. The moment she fell asleep, I climbed back up onto the balcony, and like a slightly crazy Romeo, I broke into her room.

I stroked her dark mane away from her face. Petite, soft, and vulnerable, but also fierce. Tough. *Like dandelions.* Why did it always come back to dandelions with her?

I gave my head a subtle shake as I watched her sleep. Fuck, how I’d love to jerk off all over her. Mark her creamy skin. *No*. When that finally happened, she’d be begging me for it. And *then* I’d claim her cunt. My instinct told me we’d be a perfect match and she wouldn’t fucking disappoint.

My forefinger slid down her neck, caressing her soft skin. Her lips parted and she let out an exhale, her breath warming my hand as she leaned into my touch. I gasped, removing my hand with a jerk as if she'd burned me. Memories flooded my brain again, but they were foggy, distant, hard to distinguish.

I took a step back, breaking the touch as distorted images flashed through my skull of her naked on my bed, ass up, head down, her fingers clutching the sheets and begging me for *more* with those submissive eyes.

Dante. The sound of her voice. When had I ever heard her calling my name?

I shook my head, pain piercing through my brain cells. It couldn't be. This girl didn't have a voice. *Dante, Dante, Dante.*

She chanted it like a prayer as my cock plunged inside her searing, tight heat. She was my own personal heaven, my redemption and salvation.

She turned her face to the side, her mane cascading over her shoulder. Her profile was perfect in every sense of the word, but it wasn't enough. I needed to see all of her.

I clutched her soft hips and flipped her over.

At that, her face changed. I reeled backward. No, no, no. I didn't want to see that*. Anything but that.*

"It gets hard when I do that. That means you like it." The sneer on that face. The bile in my throat.

The memory of those words knotted in my gut, and I put another foot of distance between the sleeping woman and myself.

My filthy hands shouldn't touch her purity. They would stain her pale, soft skin with my sins and ruin her. My jaw locked. My chest shook, and I balled my fists over and over again. I needed to hurt someone, or someone to hurt me, beat the shit out of me. If I could focus on the physical pain, I wouldn't have to think about the mental.

My eyes fell on Phoenix again.

To leave or not to leave.

I feared it was past that point. Around her, there was a sense of peace. Despite her glares. Despite her distaste. It felt good to be around her.

I had been watching her from afar, following her. Her privacy was nonexistent at this point. But everything I learned had only fostered my need to know more.

It was why I climbed her balcony, twice in the same night, then crept inside to watch her like she was already mine. *She is mine*, my mind screamed.

With Phoenix in a deep slumber, I took my time looking around her room. Her walls were covered with sheets of music notes—Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Bach.

Her room was simple but elegant. Unlike her sister, Phoenix preferred comfort. Her wardrobe was full of T-shirts and casual shorts, but there were also girly dresses and skirts for her outings with the girls. Her makeup table had a small amount of products, not that she needed anything. The girl was breathtaking with a bare face, anything more and she'd be causing heart attacks wherever she went.

My eyes landed on a fancy bottle of perfume. I sprayed it, then inhaled it deep into my lungs. Spring rain. *Just like her*. It became my favorite scent.

A soft moan drew my attention back to the bed and I tilted my head, watching her like a creep. She shifted onto her back, her knees falling open, and my dick stiffened.

Is she fucking with me again? But her eyes remained closed and her breathing even.

Annoyance and disappointment flared inside my chest. She released another soft sigh and shifted slightly. If her flushed cheeks were anything to go by, she was having interesting dreams.

"Are you dreaming of me?" I rasped. "You'd better be, or I'll have to creep inside your head and murder the man of your dreams."

Another soft moan echoed through the room, the sound addictive and beautiful. I'd take that as a yes or else I couldn't be held liable for whatever followed.

I was about to leave when her phone vibrated on the bedside table. I stalked over to it and paused when I saw a name on the screen. A man's name. Baptiste. Motherfucking *Baptiste* would be a dead man—whoever he was.

I unlocked the phone effortlessly, years of hacking proving useful for a change. "Let's see what fucking Baptiste has to say?" I whispered under my breath.

I got us a spot at Sphere. 20:00. See you there?

Sphere was a romantic spot in the city known for the way it catered to lovebirds celebrating anniversaries and special occasions. My grip tightened around the phone, making it crack in protest. *Motherfucker.* There'd be no romance going on between those two if I had anything to do with it.

Fuck, what day was it? I scrolled through her messages with soon-to-be-dead Baptiste, but there was no mention of a date. Goddammit! Maybe I should have a chip or tracker installed in her phone that could track all her texts. Too much? Nah.

Maybe I should just send a message that something came up. Women changed their minds about dates all the time, right? But fuck, if I did that, they could just reschedule.

Fuck it. She'd go, and I'd be right behind her. So I typed back, pounding on the screen with a bit too much force.

Can't wait.

"Oh, she can wait," I muttered, deleting his message and "her" reply. There'd be no evidence of the correspondence. "And *you* will be waiting on that date for an eternity, Baptiste."

I was already scheming how to derail their little rendezvous and deciding on the location of his burial site. Once I confirmed there were no bubbles signaling another incoming message, I returned the phone to her nightstand.

I reached into the pocket of my jeans and pulled out a slightly smashed dandelion, then put it on her nightstand along with a note.

"We'll have a nice date, won't we?" I grinned, pushing her hair from her neck, then leaned over to press my mouth against her sensitive flesh and suck on it. Gently at first, then harder. She moaned, but she didn't wake up. I straightened, seeing my beautiful handiwork. It couldn't be mistaken for anything but a hickey. "Let's see how Baptiste likes this."

"Have you ever wanted something so bad that it gives you fucking chills?" I asked my brother.

After that little performance by Nix, I sought out Amon. Of course he was in the office of our club, sitting behind the desk, his attention on his laptop. He was a workaholic, especially when something was on his mind.

Well, something was on my mind too. Nix lying on her bed, moaning and panting. I could almost imagine how she'd look at me with submissive eyes. The agitation rolled off my shoulders, hating that I couldn't take what I wanted. And I never fucking wanted that with a woman. Not since the kidnapping.

"What do you want now?" Amon asked, keeping his focus on the screen.

I let out a sardonic breath, unable to admit it out loud. Not until I secured her as mine.

"Nothing."

That brought my brother's attention to me. "Highly doubt there's *nothing* you want."

"I want to punch you," I said, grinning, wanting to change subjects. "Want to help me make it happen?"

He ran a thumb across his jaw, contemplating my words. As fucking if. We liked to box in the ring to blow off steam, but we rarely got any punches in. We were both too good to let our opponent land a hit.

"It's a bit too late for a round," he deadpanned, but he watched me with a sharp gaze. "Do you feel like you need it?"

It was how I kept my sanity. My rage and episodes, as he called them, were only on a tight leash if I blew the steam off by fighting or torturing. Sex, unfortunately, wasn't one of the ways to relieve stress since my dick refused to get hard. Until now.

Nix Romero seemed to be the woman for me.

I just had to be careful not to let her see all the things that were wrong with me. All my life, I fought to escape the shit that was wrong with me. It started when Father took me to his most expensive whorehouse when I was fifteen and insisted I lose my virginity. He wanted me to become a man. Amon had successfully avoided it since he opted to bang some older chick in our high school and get it over with.

My memory flashed to that time.

Father's fingers dug into my shoulder blades as he watched the whores line up in front of us.

I didn't want to do this.

“Pick the one you want to fuck,” he demanded.

I flushed, my eyes darting to the women. It was wrong to do this. I’d seen what Father did to Mother and I’d heard her cries. I didn’t want to be like him. Nerves twisted my stomach as I studied them, wanting to refuse.

But Mother warned that my refusal would have dire consequences.

He’d beat me, then he’d beat her, and I couldn’t allow that. So I pointed at a woman with dark brown hair and brown eyes.

The woman nodded to my father and grabbed my hand, leading me to the back of the parlor. Once we were alone in the room, the doors closed behind me. The woman offered me a fake smile and placed herself on the bed.

“I don’t want to fuck you,” I blurted out. She froze and fear entered her expression. My gut twisted with aversion. I hated this. I hated Father for making me do this, and even more for making these women do this.

“Y-you want to hurt me?” Her body started to tremble and my eyes widened. She must have thought I was like him.

I shook my head.

“No, I just don’t want to fuck you like this. Maybe we can talk?” God, if Father caught wind of this, he’d whip me black and blue. “It’ll be our secret or… or I will hurt you.” I shuddered, immediately regretting threatening the woman.

But I didn’t apologize. I couldn’t have her telling on me because I couldn’t bear for Mother to pay for my disobedience. Or my brother.

“So what do you want?”

I thought for a moment. I’d watched porn and heard plenty of boys talk about sex, but nobody talked about how to make a woman feel good. I liked knowing specific details, and I needed to feel in control. So I went for it. It wasn’t as if this woman was making my dick swell.

“Can you tell me…” I cleared my throat, my cheeks heating up. “Can you teach me how to make a woman feel good?”

And she did.

“Dante?” Amon’s voice snapped me back to the present.

He looked at me expectantly and I raised a brow. “What?”

Amon stood up and leaned against the desk. “I asked whether you need to blow off some steam?” he repeated. “I don’t want you going on a rampage in Paris.”

I rolled my eyes. “You make me sound like I’m some kind of Jack the Ripper.”

“Minus killing the women,” he drawled simply. “I’m not saying the men you pick to kill don’t deserve it, but we don’t need attention drawn to us.”

“Because of Reina Romero?”

“No, but I don’t want her involved either.”

Jesus, he was hard up for her, and it made Nix flash in my mind. Would fucking her release my tension and need to kill? Would it possibly eliminate the rage I felt brimming inside me at all times?

“Fine,” I told him.

“So you don’t need to—”

“No, I don’t need to do anything. I had some fun beating the shit out of someone with Ghost earlier.” My brother watched me, his hand scrubbing down his face. “Nothing you need to concern yourself with.”

He rubbed his jaw as if debating whether to believe me or not, and dry amusement filled me. He was only a few weeks older than me, but sometimes he acted like he was years older.

“Why does that make me worry more?”

I watched his face. “You have enough on your hands with Reina Romero.”

His eyes narrowed. “Do I need to worry about Phoenix Romero, too?”

“Don’t you fucking worry about her.” The calm and deadly threat escaped me, stilling the air. He had Reina to worry about. Phoenix was mine.

Amon watched my face, then let out an amused breath. “Well, fuck me sideways.”

I walked out the door, flipping him off over my shoulder.

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NINE

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PHOENIX

I moved my lips, but of course no sound came out. My eyelids were heavy and my brain hazy as I gripped at the sheets around me. Why were they so warm, so silky?

A warm breath brushed against my neck and I startled. The scent of rich wood and leather seemed to puff up like a cloud around me. Naked flesh against mine. Fingers thrusting in and out of me. A warm, hard body against mine.

My eyes snapped open and a dark shadow loomed above me. Dante's muscled chest pressed against mine, looking like a Roman god in the darkness.

Five o'clock stubble covered his face. I gasped, but before I could protest, his mouth covered mine. It scratched at my soft flesh while his long fingers had found themselves inside my panties.

A rush of energy surged through my veins, his sheer presence and overwhelming heat consuming every ounce of oxygen. His firm touch brought pleasure and pain as I pulled my mouth away from his, gasping for air.

The intensity in his eyes knocked the breath out of me, my hoarse breaths echoing in the small space of my bedroom.

My hips bucked against my will, grinding against his hard length, and my lips parted. I met his gaze, the depths of his blues pulling me into the deepest, darkest oceans.

He took my wrists and dragged them above my head, grinding his cock against my entrance.

I watched his mouth move around a command. “Open your legs wider for me, dandelion.”

My knees fell open and he kneeled between my legs, sliding his knuckles against my drenched pussy.

My rasping breaths drifted through the air, my breasts rising and falling as he reached under me and unhooked my bra, leaving me half-naked.

“*Dante*…” I mouthed. I couldn’t hear my voice, but something in his eyes flashed. He thrust two fingers inside me, my walls clenching around them. His other hand roamed my body hungrily. He yanked my boyshorts down my legs and plunged inside me in one go.

Without giving me time to adjust, he thrust faster and harder. There was something so beautiful about the animalistic power behind his thrusts, pinning me to the pillowy bed and forbidding me to move.

My fingers dug into his biceps and I held on. He plunged inside me again and I could feel his grunts with the brush of his chest against mine. My head rolled back, his thrusts tearing me apart.

He pinched my nipples, torturing and squeezing. Trembling beneath him, my insides pulsed around his cock.

He took and took and took. He took everything, and in return, he gave so much pleasure. He drove inside me with harsh strokes, fucking me savagely.

Pushing his hand between our bodies, he teased my clit in rough circles until I was bucking, reaching, arching my back off the bed. His lips were back on mine, kissing me and consuming me while my pussy milked his cock.

I watched his face as he drove into me, the veins in his neck straining with tension. That beautiful, kissable mouth inches from mine.

“Mine.” *Thrust.* “Yours.” *Thrust.* “Ours.”

My heart thundered as boundless pleasure exploded through me. My throat vibrated and Dante’s eyes locked on mine as he thrust into me like a madman.

“Beautiful,” I thought I saw him mouth, but then his lips were on my neck, biting, licking, sucking. My orgasm was like a violent storm, chasing everything in its path. Dante continued to fuck me with relentless roughness.

My limbs shook. My muscles ached.

I sobbed, my body shaking as his hand wrapped around my neck. Another wave of pleasure was about to crash over me when I felt the ground give out. I was falling, my mouth open on a silent O, and—

I gasped, startling myself awake, panting as I looked around the room and searched for the man I could've sworn was about to coax another release from me.

But there was nothing—and no one—except for darkness. My damp hair stuck to my temples and my heart thundered erratically.

I removed my hand from my soaked pussy, embarrassment coloring my cheeks.

It was all Dante's fault.

Damn him!

I sat up, staring in shock at the sight of the juices coating my fingers. My body throbbed with a dull type of ache that screamed of unsatisfied pleasure. I scooted back to sit against the headboard when something on my nightstand caught my attention.

My fingers trembled as I reached for the dandelion, pushing it aside to read the note underneath it.

Did you have sweet dreams? Closed windows and doors won't keep me out.

There was no signature, but it didn't matter.

The fucking stalker was in my room while I slept.

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TEN

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DANTE

The clock ticked and filled the silence. The room was warm and inviting and had comfortable seating, which I fucking hated. I didn't want to lounge here. I wanted to find a solution to my issues and move on.

I was sick and tired of the constant *blah, blah, fucking blah*. Dr. Freud's therapy sessions were a major inconvenience. If only the good doctor wasn't so good at her job. The thirty-something woman was probably every man's dream: intelligent, beautiful, smart, classy.

She just wasn't *my* dream.

"Tell me how you're doing with the outbursts." Dr. Freud's PhD from Harvard hung behind her, the evidence of her accomplishments undeniable. I knew she came from old money and yet here she was, treating a mobster in Italy. It made you wonder.

Running a thoughtful hand across my jaw, I answered as truthfully as I could. "I've been dealing." I couldn't exactly tell her *how* I'd been releasing my steam. Yes, there was doctor-patient confidentiality, but I wasn't willing to test how far it went. "I met a woman. She'll be mine soon."

Her eyes fell to her lap, then returned to my eyes. "That's progress," she stated cryptically. "Does *she* know she's yours?"

"Not yet, but she will." *Eventually.*

She gave her head a shake. "We'll come back to your woman in a moment." She paused and brought her pen up to her mouth, smiling. "How are you handling your outbursts, Dante? They're still… present?"

I nodded, although they weren't happening as frequently since I'd met Phoenix. *Interesting.* Another confirmation that she was meant to be mine.

“They’re not as frequent or as strong.”

“Does the ASL help?” I gave her a blank look. The whole reason behind learning ASL was to express myself during episodes of extreme anger when I wasn’t able to find words. To reset my brain pathways by learning a new skill—or so the doctor claimed. Supposedly you can sign during blackouts. Go figure. I went along with it just so she would leave me the hell alone. I had no fucking idea if it helped, but I was glad for it. I’d now be putting even more effort into learning it fluently so that I could talk to Phoenix if nothing else. “Okay, we’ll go with yes… How does your woman handle your… outbursts?”

I focused my stare on her crimson-red heels and suddenly wondered if Phoenix would find this part of me revolting. The woman clearly didn’t like me… yet. So it was best I didn’t share my faults with her.

“They’re happening less since I’ve met her,” I admitted, somewhat deflecting.

I wasn’t a good man, and I was raised by an even worse one. Evil bred evil. I learned at an early age that darkness was part of us, just like the light. Fighting it was fruitless, so instead, I embraced it. The dark just felt *right*.

If there was a tiny piece of light that appealed to me—like Phoenix, who seemed to have balanced light and dark just right—I’d snatch it and hold on to it. Any-fucking-way. Right or wrong.

“That seems too… dangerous,” she supplied tentatively. Dr. Freud shifted in her seat, crossing one leg over the other and reaching for her pendant. It was her nervous tell. “It could become an issue.”

I ran my tongue across my teeth and resisted the need to lash out, but the tension in my body remained. “I don’t see the issue.”

“The issue is,” she started carefully, “that you could pose an even bigger threat to yourself”—o*r to others*, she meant—“when she’s no longer around.”

“Well, that’s easily remedied. I’ll ensure she doesn’t go anywhere.” Fuck, I really said that out loud.

My gaze held hers, challenging her to contradict me, and I could almost hear the wheels turning in her head as we stared at each other.

She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, then focused on her folder. “And if she’s ready to move on?”

A quiet tick of a bomb about to detonate drummed in my brain. She looked up from her papers, eyes wide at what I could only imagine she saw

in me. *An animal*. *Twisted*. *Sick*.

Getting to my feet, I headed for the door.

“Dante, you will respect this woman’s wishes, right?” Her voice touched my back and my hand paused on the doorknob.

I glanced at her over my shoulder and flashed her a smile, pulling the door open and striding out. “Of course.”

Not.

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ELEVEN

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PHOENIX

My fingers danced over the piano keys, the vibrations of each note buzzing through me. Each one felt different, linking to a far-off memory.

My earliest memories of playing the piano were from when I was around three years old. I was told I had perfect pitch, the ability to identify or recreate a note without having any reference point. I didn't lose my hearing until I was six, but by that time, music had become a part of me. Those early years were enough to ingrain the love for it into my bones. I knew how C-sharp minor sounded and the exact level of vibration it sent through my fingers when I played it.

By the time I became legally deaf, playing piano was my escape and helped me to feel some semblance of normalcy. To feel like the old me, before I lost my hearing. It helped that I continued with a private tutor. Even though I knew my prospects weren't promising for a career later on, I'd always known music was my calling.

My sister had fashion, and I knew she took music classes only for my benefit. There was no backup plan for me. I'd always known the reality, that I would struggle in a symphony orchestra or with other musicians, but I powered through. There were setbacks, of course. Certain maestros who weren't willing to risk their career—or energy—on a deaf girl, even though I wasn't the first deaf piano player in the world. Not many wanted to take on the challenge.

My fingers slowed with the last of the notes, music fading through the buzzing in my fingers. I brought my arms down to my lap, letting them rest gracefully.

Maestro nodded, satisfied, and before he could say, “We’re done for the day,” everyone was up and bolting for the door, dragging their instruments along despite the fact that we’d be right back here tomorrow for practice. There was only one more week until the ballet company was due to perform with the live orchestra as part of the third-year graduation requirement.

It wasn’t the best gig, but it was something. And it was another step closer to the music industry.

I stood up from my spot, pausing for a moment to glance at the time on my phone. It was only five in the afternoon. Truthfully, I was purposely delaying, hoping not to run into any of the ballet crew. Especially that prick Erik, the principal dancer.

I met Maestro’s gaze as he packed up, and I groaned inwardly. I couldn’t expect them all to know ASL, but it made communication difficult at the best of times, exhausting at the worst.

He must have read my wish in my eyes.

“Do you want to practice a bit longer?” He spoke slowly, enunciating his words. I didn’t have it in me to correct him, knowing he was doing so for my benefit, but as long as he didn’t mumble, I could read lips.

“*Yes, thank you*.”

He headed out of the auditorium, leaving me alone.

Taking a deep breath, I brought my fingers to the key block, its smooth, cool surface the only therapy that worked without fail to soothe my heart and soul. I began playing again, letting each note drown out everything else.

I poured it all out. My pain. My regrets.

There lived a child in this world who I thought about every single day, loving him or her unconditionally. The regret was eating me up. I should have been stronger, braver, *something more*. Were they loved? Where were they, this child of mine?

My fingers danced faster and faster as the world around me faded. I couldn’t hear it, but I sensed everything. The vibration. The ache. The ambiance of hundreds of years of performance that played out in this very space. The darkness of the stage as eyes stared from every corner. I felt endless and powerful here, the world a wide-open stage, bowing to me and my pain.

My every cell came alive and I closed my eyes, my soft brown curls spilling down my shoulder. I felt so free. Maybe even hopeful.

I was in a field of dandelions where he and our baby were mine, where they belonged to me. God, I never wanted to resurface from this daydream. *He doesn't remember me; I can't forget him. Hate you; love you.*

Memories rushed through my mind as tears stung my eyes, hoping to drown out the world so I'd forget how much it hurt to wake up and realize that the little life I'd grown for nine months was gone.

I loved him; I hated him. He didn't come, and even after all these days, weeks, months, years… It fucking hurt the same as it did the day I realized he'd abandoned me.

Dread curdled in my stomach as thoughts of him whipped around me. Why was he doing this to me? Why couldn't he just stay away and leave me alone? He was already heavily at work destroying my peace of mind.

Abruptly, I slammed the fallboard down, the vibration sending goosebumps racing over my skin.

What the hell was I going to do? I would never be free while he was alive, and there was still so much he could take from me. My sanity. My peace of mind.

My eyes opened and I shook my head. My hands trembled as I brushed my fingers over the dark maple lid, taking deep breaths.

One encounter with Dante was all it took for me to crack and now there was no stopping it from expanding. I could feel it like chapped skin, danger seeping into the crevices of my hardened shell.

I felt his gaze on me. I'd felt it since we crossed paths again. I raised my head, my eyes roaming the empty seats in the auditorium, then up to the balconies. I couldn't see him, but I *knew* he was here.

My heartbeat picked up its pace.

It should frighten me how attuned my body was to him. It wasn't healthy. It wasn't normal. I never thought to fight it before, but I would now.

I rose to my feet, grabbing my phone and my bag. I threw it over my shoulder, then made my way out of the auditorium. The hallway leading to the front of the building was empty, the dim light providing just enough guidance.

As I turned the corner, I ran into someone.

My phone fell out of my hand and I reached down to pick it up but froze when a pair of bruised hands reached it first. I lifted my gaze to the man's and groaned inwardly. Exactly the person I was trying to avoid.

Erik Costa.

The principal who might as well be labeled a prima donna. He had the attitude to match it.

"Sorry." His lips moved, and I stared at him in confusion, taken aback by his apology. Everyone knew Erik never apologized to *anyone*. Maybe whoever had put the bruises on his face gave him a concussion too, turning him decent all of a sudden.

No matter.

I stood up, snatching the phone from his hands. I tilted my head and went to sidestep him when his fingers wrapped around my forearm. *Here we fucking go.*

I started to yank my hand out of his grip, but the expression on his face had me pausing. His eyes darted behind me and I followed his gaze. What was he looking at?

I shook my head when Erik waved his hands around me, a visible tremor in them.

"I'm sorry for everything." My eyebrows met my hairline at the heartfelt expression on his bruised face. "When I asked you out on a date, I didn't take your rejection well. It's me who's an ass… Not you." He was speaking painfully slowly, making me grow more uncomfortable by the second. "I'm sorry for being a bully." His eyes flicked behind me again, but this time I didn't turn. "I'm a douche, and you're magnificent. A muse."

A douche. A muse.

There was only one person I knew who used that word and was willing to dish out bruises. I suspected Erik's come-to-Jesus revelation might have something to do with *him*.

I pulled up the notes section on my phone and typed a message.

IT'S FINE. JUST STAY AWAY FROM ME.

He nodded so rapidly that just looking at him gave me a case of motion sickness. He scurried away and I remained glued to my spot, waiting. Once he disappeared from my sight, I resumed my path out of the building.

Paris was crowded in the summer. Hot. The smell of urine seemed to only get stronger under the beating sun. Every alleyway, every corner. I

held my breath walking through certain areas of the city, my nose scrunching and an inadvertent gag rising up my throat.

It was the city of love, but I never saw the appeal or the romance in it. Yes, there was beauty and so much history, but all I associated this city with was pain.

It was where I'd come right after I'd given birth, hiding my body under the oversized sweaters and baggy warm clothes thanks to the cold winter. I buried myself in my studies. It was where I attempted to forget but was never able to.

I turned yet another corner, the weight of his stare on my back like a pair of hands. I could feel him even though I couldn't see him. Once or twice, I even caught a whiff of cigarettes mixed with rich wood and leather, indicating just how close he'd gotten. I'd recognize that scent anywhere.

My skin prickled with awareness. My steps faltered a few times, almost like my body subconsciously craved his closeness. Goosebumps erupted on my skin as I worked to fight the urge to go to him like a moth to a flame, ignoring the fact that it'd take me to my own death.

A sudden movement from the corner of my eye jolted me to a stop.

I slowly turned around and my insides coiled. A guy lay on the ground with a bloodied nose, cradling his arm to his chest. Dante stood over him, his expression dark.

"*What the—*" I glared at him. "*What is wrong with you?*"

Several passersby shot curious looks our way, but nobody stopped. So much for common decency.

"He shouldn't have touched you." I gave him the middle finger, wishing I could shove it up his ass. "Would you rather he grope you?" I hated how good his ASL was, but even more, I hated staring at his mouth as he spoke, unable to tear my gaze away.

"*I might prefer it to your company*," I signed agitatedly.

"Aww, don't be like that." Goddamn him.

"*How do you know ASL?*" I questioned.

He shrugged. "Watched YouTube videos." I raised my eyebrows in disbelief. "It's fascinating." I scoffed. "Shouldn't you be grateful I know it at all?"

"*I'd prefer not having any conversations with you.*" Motherfucker. I really should have put more effort into learning how to sign curse words

aside from the middle finger. I'd have to settle for spelling it out for him. *F-U-C-K. Y-O-U*. He should be able to grasp those two little words.

"You love it," he claimed. "You're impressed with my skills, admit it."

"*No, I'm not*," I snapped. "*First, you should have learned Italian Sign Language, and second, why in the fuck were you in my room last night, creep?*"

His expression was a cold mask, but his eyes gleamed with something carnal. I didn't want to be around it.

"Dreaming about me, huh?"

While I thought of a comeback, he strode toward me and hooked his arm around me, keeping eye contact as if to ensure I could read his lips. "I'll crack the skull and cut off the hands of anyone who tries to touch you."

My mouth went dry. Confusion was once again front and center in my mind. He'd been pretending not to know me, yet here he was acting like he cared.

I breathed harshly, fighting my heart and any chance at his redemption. He had none left.

I stepped away from him, furious at the way my heart trembled in my chest. Taking advantage of my inner turmoil, Dante clutched my elbow and started dragging me with him.

I attempted to shake off his grip. "*What are you doing?*"

"Walking you home."

I stopped moving, wrenching my arm free. "*No, you're not. Creep.*"

"I *will* walk you home," he mouthed, his expression threatening.

"*No*," I replied calmly even as my insides raged. How dare he act like he gave a shit? It was too fucking late. I no longer needed him.

He breathed through his teeth, not even bothering to mask his fury. "I wasn't asking."

His powerful hand engulfed my elbow, searing my skin. I hated how I trembled. Hated how much I wanted him. My skin heated where he touched me, spreading through the rest of my body.

I broke out in shivers.

My pulse throbbed between my legs while we stood in the middle of the city staring at each other. Dante was a big man, muscles rippling beneath his clothes, and if he really wanted to, he could overpower me.

Fuck, why did that make the ache between my legs worse?

I hated him. I hated his betrayal, his insanity, his arrogance, and I hated how he lied with that smirk on his face. But most of all, I hated how much I missed him *so fucking much*.

I could still vividly remember how the parts of him I loved felt under my touch. His arms around me, protective and warm. His lips over my skin and the soft words he would mouth with those lips.

I shook my head. It was all an act. He didn't actually care.

My teeth ached, and I unclenched my jaw. I learned my lesson the last time. It was impossible to come out of an encounter with him unscathed.

"*You can walk behind me*," I signed. "*Stay the fuck away from me*."

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TWELVE

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PHOENIX

Expensive cars filled the parking lot of Sphere.

Exiting my Uber, I walked toward the entrance of the restaurant, watching my balance in the tall heels I was wearing. The slit of the ivory dress revealed my upper thigh, drawing glances, and I started questioning my choice of wardrobe, not to mention having dinner with Baptiste in the first place.

Baptiste Leboute was three years older than me, and while I was still just getting into the whole music scene, he was already known among European musicians. He was a beautiful specimen, with blond hair, sharp features, and a patriarchal nose that might as well be carved from marble. He always wore stylish clothes, never one to be subtle about his wealth.

Some thought him a show-off, and they weren't wrong. Besides, it wasn't as if I had guys lining up for me. At least none with the type of wit and charm Baptiste had.

I spotted him by the door, waiting for me. It was a lucky coincidence that he reminded me of our plans earlier this morning. He claimed he had sent me place and time via text, but I never got those messages. Either way, we were able to sync up our plans and I was glad for it.

I needed a distraction from a certain stalker.

Baptiste's eyes lit up when they landed on me, and I came to a stop three feet away from him. Just like a typical Frenchman, he didn't believe in personal space, so he closed the distance, pulling me flush against him.

"You look gorgeous." He always spoke French very slowly for my benefit, although I told him it wasn't necessary.

“*Thank you*,” I signed simply. My gaze traveled over him. “*You’re not looking too shabby yourself*.”

We started walking.

“Good thing I reminded you about our dinner date,” he continued speaking, watching me and almost slamming headfirst into the door as he tried to open it. He smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, that was clumsy.”

I waved my hand. Baptiste and I shared a few classes, and we both participated in a symphony honoring Beethoven a few weeks ago. We’d been entertaining getting together for a few months and finally found time with classes being behind us for the summer.

Baptiste opened the door for me and I entered the restaurant. The hostess was waiting for us with a big smile on her face.

“Oh, mon Dieu!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands. “Welcome, we’ve been waiting for you.”

My gaze flickered to Baptiste who looked just as surprised. Then he shrugged, meeting my gaze. “I made reservations.”

I glanced around. It didn’t look very busy, with more staff hurrying around than guests.

We followed her further into the restaurant to our table. There were two occupied tables, but I couldn’t quite tell whether they worked here and were polishing the glasses, or they found something wrong with their glasses and were wiping them down.

I took my seat, pulling up the hem of my dress and trying to avoid everyone’s eyes on my exposed thigh. My gaze hesitantly darted to my own glass, which seemed spotless.

Dismissing the others, I focused on the interior. The columns curved up to the ceiling, forming arches above our heads. The crystal chandelier glittered above us, and although my world was mostly silent, I could feel the buzz of the restaurant. The dim light threw warm shadows and created a romantic atmosphere.

“You look beautiful under this light,” Baptiste said, and I inwardly groaned. He was wasting his time. I’d told him several times before that I wasn’t interested in any kind of relationship. All my focus was on music and school, and when he insisted that he understood, I finally said yes to dinner. Truthfully, it felt good to go out with someone other than my friends.

As I lifted my hands to sign, something about the way he glanced around us with an uncomfortable smile had me pausing. I frowned when the realization sunk in. He was embarrassed. But why? What did he expect?

An awkward stretch followed before I dug for my phone in my clutch and pulled it out. I typed, the tips of my fingers hitting the screen a bit too roughly. **How did you think we would communicate?**

Baptiste knew the basics of sign language, apparently it was an elective at his high school. It was either that or woodworking, and he opted for the "easier" class, he'd told me. I shifted my phone around so he could read my question.

"We can talk," he said, smiling sheepishly. "Type, or use our hands. Feet. Whatever."

I typed again. **So it doesn't bother you if I sign?**

"Let's not talk about that stuff." He clasped his hands, smiling brightly. "Now, what are you in the mood for? Chicken, fish… You Americans love beef steaks, *non*?" He ran his hand through his hair. "*Filet de bœuf or the entrecôte*."

I rolled my eyes. That was as derogatory as me assuming all French people ate frog legs.

Thankfully, the waitress showed up with amuse-bouches and wines for us to sample.

"Would you like to taste tonight's specials or just hear about them?" she offered, smiling brightly.

I started to sign, and again, Baptiste's smile froze as he rubbed his neck awkwardly. Frustration bubbled in me. I didn't expect people to know sign language, never mind ASL while I was in Europe, but it pissed me off when a person knew it and feigned ignorance. What was the fucking point.

I sighed and typed into my Notes app on my phone, then shifted the screen so the waitress could read it. **Red wine and a vegetarian salad with calamari on the side.**

"I'll take the samples," Baptiste announced. "Are they free?"

That was another thing that everyone knew about Baptiste. Even though he had money, he was kind of a cheapskate. The waitress put the tray down, then placed the dishes in front of him. His eyes fell to her cleavage and I looked away, pretending not to notice.

I rolled my eyes at his whorish ways. I didn't want a love story, but this behavior was utterly disappointing. The least he could do was wait until our

dinner was over.

My mind flashed to my first date with Dante.

Discomfort gnawed at me as he drove down the coastal highway toward our destination. It remained to be seen where we were headed.

My hair whipped in the wind and my dress billowed and fluttered around me as we sped down the streets in Dante's convertible. I wasn't positive, but I had an inkling that Dante Leone really loved his cars.

Turning his head, he caught me observing him. I didn't bother averting my eyes. I also got the inkling he liked my boldness, if the way his gaze traveling over me was anything to go by. My sandals. My bare legs. The ridiculous yellow dress that Isla insisted I wear.

I'd have preferred shorts and a simple top, but my best friend was in a "knock his socks off" mood, despite not knowing it was Dante taking me out. Nobody knew about my mystery man, and I'd leave it that way for a while. My sister didn't know about this date at all or she would've been all over me, insisting on meeting the man I was going out with. I wanted to keep him a secret for a little while longer though.

I reached into my purse and felt for my mace. You never knew when you might need it, and I'd been in plenty of situations where a man thought me too dumb to take my "no" for a serious answer. I was deaf, not fucking dumb.

Dante's fingers brushed over my shoulder and I turned my head his way.

"You okay?" Gosh, he had the most gorgeous lips I had ever seen. It was no hardship at all to stare at them while he spoke.

I nodded my answer.

I still didn't understand why he wanted this date or what he was doing in California. It made me slightly suspicious of his intentions. Grandma made it clear that Papà's enemies were also ours because of our last name. It didn't matter we'd kept away from the underworld, we would always be a part of it by default.

Leaving my mace securely in my purse, I pulled out my phone and typed the question into my text-to-talk app. ***What are you doing in California? Don't you live in Italy?***

He flicked a glance at the road, then turned to me and answered. "Yes, I live in Italy. I had a business deal to work out with a vineyard here." When I cocked my eyebrow in surprise, he continued, "A bad drought in Italy ruined my crop. I own a couple of vineyards here for that very reason."

I snorted, then started typing again. ***A mobster turned winemaker?***

My papà had a few legitimate business fronts. I knew from Reina and her eavesdropping that it was a norm in the underworld, but winemaking seemed like an odd choice.

I typed again. ***Why winemaking?***

He shrugged, waiting until he stopped to type his answer. ***It's relaxing. My birth mother's family was into it and I inherited it.***

I raised a brow as he resumed driving. ***They were farmers?***

He laughed, making me wish I could hear the sound of it. I met the Leone brothers well after I lost my hearing, so it was impossible to assign a memory to it in my head. With my sister, Grandma, and Papà, I still heard their voices in my head when they signed or mouthed words.

"Not quite. They were part of the underworld too." His brows furrowed, his eyes on the road. His lips moved, but I couldn't read them. I tugged on his sleeve so he'd look at me. When our eyes connected, he repeated, "How does one learn to sign?"

I stared at him in surprise but didn't think anything of it. Many people asked, but they never actually put effort into learning it. ***There are apps. Classes. Even YouTube.***

"Give me the best app and some suggestions for classes," he demanded.

I typed again, then waited for the voice to play out from the speaker. ***I'm not sure about Italian Sign Language. Probably best if you ask someone back home.***

"Shit, I didn't know it wasn't universal." I shrugged. Most people didn't. Silence followed for a moment, his attention on the road, then he turned his face my way and mouthed, "Do you sign in Italian Sign Language?" I shook my head. "ASL?" I nodded. "That's the one I want." Butterflies took flight in my stomach, and I was fairly certain so did my heart. I would have never pegged Dante Leone as the sweetheart type. "Like I said, text me the best app and class suggestions. You can teach me too." Then, as if remembering his manners, he added, "Please."

I nodded, my lips curving into a smile at the memory of him sneaking his number into my phone during our first interaction. Dante was a determined man, reminding me very much of the boy I first crossed paths with when I was eight. The very same boy who took the blame for the vase I'd broken. I still remembered the fear I felt for him and his brother for being our vigilantes.

He tapped my leg, making the memory of our first meeting disappear. "Nix, I need those suggestions."

I sent a few to his phone, then put mine away.

My breath cut short, noting the surroundings. We were in Santa Monica. Maybe I could ask him to ditch what he had planned and instead take me to Pacific Park? I'd wanted to visit it since I was a little girl, but something always went askew and it never happened.

He stopped at the red light, then turned to face me. "Are you up for a wild ride?" I blinked, confusion clearly on my face. "When I hacked into your phone, I saw the screensaver. You, me, wild rides, a view of the Pacific. What could be better?" I smiled so big that my cheeks hurt. "Although, you'd better change your screensaver to a picture of us."

My cheeks heated at the way he was looking at me. Possessive. Like he'd kill anyone who dared to take me away. And I liked it. I wanted to be his.

Five minutes later, he parked the car and rushed around to open the door for me. I could feel the buzz of adrenaline rippling through my veins. The clear blue skies shimmered above us and the spring temperatures spoke of summer just around the corner.

He extended his hand and I slipped my fingers into his warm palm as my eyes traveled over his tall frame clad in jeans and a black James Dean T-shirt. He had a bad-boy vibe to him. It was hot.

"You ready for the ride, adrenaline junkie?"

I grinned. I was more than ready.

The hours that followed were amazing, and it was turning out to be one of the best days of my entire life. We went on every ride, the faster, the better. The higher, the better. We danced and ran from one end of the park and back again.

Dante took my hand now, both of us panting as we made a beeline for the West Coaster, the oceanfront steel roller coaster. Dante paused by the Pacific Wheel, glancing at me. "Want to do the Ferris wheel first?"

I snorted, smiling happily. "Lame," I mouthed, already feeling comfortable making little sounds around him. People assumed I couldn't voice simple words, but I could. I learned speech before I lost my hearing around my sixth birthday, but I didn't feel comfortable letting just anyone hear the sound of my voice. I was self-conscious about it since I could no longer hear it myself.

“I thought so too.” He chuckled mischievously, then led me toward our thrill ride.

But just as we made our way, a group of three guys snickered, making exaggerated grimaces and hand gestures. I ignored it, but Dante stopped abruptly, his expression turning dark as he glared at them.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out they were making fun of me, but before I could do or say anything, everything blurred. One second, Dante and those assholes were glaring at each other, and the next, Dante lunged for them. I should have been scared, petrified, but I wasn’t. Instead, I stared at the scene in front of me with flushed cheeks.

I watched with my mouth parted, slightly flattered—or turned on, I couldn’t decide—as Dante beat the idiots to a pulp. The crowd around us was growing, admiring or condemning this glorious man for standing up for me.

Just as he was about to kick one of the guys already clutching his stomach, I approached him and tugged on his sleeve. “Police will come,” I mouthed.

He gave me a tense nod, then kicked the fucker again and grabbed my hand, pulling me away from it all.

“Sorry about that,” he said, facing me. “Let’s go on our next ride.” I shook my head and his expression fell. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I smiled, almost too wide. I reached for my phone and typed quickly. ***I’m not scared. That was awesome and all the adrenaline I needed. I don’t want to be here when the cops arrive, but that doesn’t mean our date is over.***

His dark blue eyes lifted from my phone and shimmered with something thrilling. Something unhinged. Something I liked… a lot.

“Did you like seeing me fight?” he asked slowly. I licked my lips, wishing I could tell him just how good it felt to see him stand up for me. My sister and Isla did it, but no man—including my own papà—had ever dared to. We both stopped, facing each other, our darkness and loneliness circling each other. “Did you?” he repeated, taking my hands and lifting them over his head to clasp around his neck.

My body arched into him, hungry for his… everything.

I nodded and he lowered his head, running his nose along the length of my neck before he met my eyes again. He felt like a piece of me that had

been missing, and I knew it sounded ridiculous, but I could almost hear it clicking into place.

"I think you're a bit on the wild side," he drawled, his lazy grin doing things to my insides that would be dangerous for any teenage girl.

I gave him my most innocent smile while batting my eyelashes. I put some distance between us and reached for my phone, then quickly typed before I lost my courage. ***Is not wearing panties being on the wild side?***

He read the message while I peered up into his eyes, watching the grin spread even wider over his handsome face. "My, my, my. Phoenix Romero, you are a naughty little thing." I took my bottom lip between my teeth as he leaned close, his breath caressing the shell of my ear.

Then he led me to his car, assisting me into the passenger seat. He cupped my cheek and said, "You better never be naughty with anyone else."

When he got behind the wheel, he shot off a message to someone, then started the car. For the next hour, we drove in silence. The sun was gone, replaced by a glowing moon.

He stopped outside of a field full of dandelions, tall grass and trees moving with the night breeze in the distance. From the corner of my eye, I spotted a truck as it was leaving.

When I shot Dante a curious look, he explained, "It's a surprise."

"Who was that?"

He waved his hand. "Cesar, my right-hand man. But don't worry, my muse. He didn't see you."

I released a breath of relief. It was for the best we kept this our own little secret. At least for now.

He helped me out of the car, then hooked an arm around my shoulder. We made our way over the soft grass while my heart fluttered in my chest. I had never felt so safe. I had never felt so right. It was terrifying and thrilling all at once.

We stopped and he pointed to where a blanket and a picnic basket that looked like it could feed dozens had been arranged. I kicked off my shoes and we sat on the blanket as the full moon shimmered above us.

The breeze folded over us and coddled the dandelions as the moonlight danced upon them. It felt like watching nature flirt. Was that what he was doing with me?

I met his gaze, swallowed my fear, and went for it.

Opening my mouth to speak, he beat me to it. "I like you. A lot."

For a few seconds, my thundering heartbeat was all I felt. I found my face mere inches from his. “I like you too,” I mouthed.

He cracked a lazy smile. “Really?”

I nodded. I liked him completely. Blindly. He felt like the one. *Were we too young to know any better? I was approaching my eighteenth birthday and Dante was almost four years older, but somehow, our ages felt irrelevant.*

As though I weighed nothing, he pulled me up and we danced, swaying softly to the silence and the breeze. My feet on his shoes, he led me with a feral grace, never faltering. A strong breeze came in and dandelion fluff floated in the wind, mirroring my soul at this very moment.

Light. Unburdened. Happy.

I liked everything about him, the smell and feel of him holding me. I was mesmerized by the sight of him. I reached up to touch his face, his skin burning my fingertips. It only made sense that he’d be hot-blooded with that temper of his.

He smiled at me and I smiled back, the two of us twirling about the meadow as the stars and the moon above gave us their blessing. Our dancing slowed and we stood there, holding each other. He rested his chin on my head, stroking my hair, his fingers grazing the bare skin of my neck.

His hand slipped to my nape, pulling me back so I could see his face.

“I want to kiss you.”

I put my hand on his chest. “Then do it.” I blushed. Dante must have noticed, because his lips brushed over my cheeks, one and then the other. His lips brushed mine—soft and warm. He pulled back a little as if to ensure it was okay. Then he kissed me again, fiercer and more demanding.

I hooked my hands around his neck, pulling him in and crushing myself against his muscular body. He kissed my neck and my cheeks before circling back to my mouth.

This time, he claimed it, invading my mouth with his hot tongue. We fell into a deep, drugging kiss, absorbing every single sensation. He tasted so good, like chocolate and sin. His body was hard; his lips soft. I tugged on his hair, needing more of him while he clamped his hands on my hips, hoisting me up.

My legs hooked around him and he thrust his hips upward, drawing a gasp from me. It made me throb with an intoxicating ache.

I rubbed against him, hoping he'd touch me there. He was making me hot and needy all over. I mewled into his mouth, grinding myself against his body.

He grunted into my mouth and I froze, pulling away. "You okay?"

His eyes were locked on my lips.

"I won't be if you don't kiss me again." I smiled, but before I could kiss him again, he said, "We'll take it slow. Okay?"

Gosh, he was every girl's dream and he wanted ***me****. Me!*

I think I'm falling in love with you. *The words didn't leave me, but my mind screamed them. I yearned for him with a desperation that should have scared me, but it didn't.*

"Slow," I repeated soundlessly.

He closed the distance between our lips, pushing his big hand into the back of my hair and tilting my head for a deeper kiss. Deep and thorough, unhurried yet intense. His tongue parted my lips, brushing against mine while he devoured me. His hands touched me everywhere, as eager to feel all of me as I was to explore every inch of him.

It was the happiest moment of my life. A moment of sheer happiness. I found someone who wanted me despite all my shortcomings, and he was all mine.

Until he wasn't. Until I was left alone.

Click. Click. Click.

The vibration of the table shattered through my memory. I lifted my head and found Baptiste's face blotchy, coughing and pounding on his chest while his other hand repeatedly landed on the table.

"What the fuck is in this?" he choked out.

A hand landed on the table. My head snapped up, shock rendering me speechless when I found Dante standing over us.

"It's our special recipe, cod with a sprinkle of cayenne pepper," Dante said with a cold smile. I tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear as his dark presence engulfed me, that familiar scent seeping into my lungs.

Another of Baptiste's coughing fits shook the table, startling my attention back to him. The waitress handed him a glass of wine and Baptiste gulped it down like a man dying from thirst.

"This dish is *merde*," he hissed, and I watched him slam back another full glass of wine, unsure what to do.

“Apologies, *monsieur*.” The waitress handed him another glass, eyes like saucers. “We didn’t know you were allergic to cayenne pepper.”

Baptiste stilled, narrowing his eyes on her. “I never said I was allergic.”

I glared at Dante and watched pure satisfaction flash in his eyes, along with brutality and a thrill for something that I didn’t want to explore further. I was positive this unhinged monster had set it all up.

“A glass of red for you, as requested.” Dante held out a bottle of wine my way. He knew I preferred red to white wine, and suddenly, I wished I could claw his eyes and make him hurt. The way he’d hurt me. I always knew life was hard. I’d seen it in my mother’s eyes. In Papà’s eyes when she died. Life broke my heart a long time ago, but Dante Leone… he smashed it into a million pieces.

“*Get lost*,” I signed, angry at myself for letting him get to me so easily.

His eyes lit up. “I’m afraid someone’s due for a lesson.”

He reached over, and while I stared at him in confusion, he started pouring the bottle of 1949 Richebourg Grand Cru. But instead of pouring it into the glass, he was spilling it onto my lap.

I jumped, pushing my chair back, but it was too late. The bottom half of my beautiful dress was irrevocably drenched. Anger shot through me, and I looked up to meet Dante’s expression.

“Oops, I missed the glass.” He carefully placed the bottle on the table, his knuckles white as he glared at Baptiste. Then he returned his attention to me. “Next time I see you with a man, you’ll be signing his death warrant,” he signed in perfect ASL while saying it out loud for Baptiste’s benefit.

“*Are you nuts*?” I signed, my whole body shaking. That was a dumb question. He was, and there was no doubt about it. “*What are you doing here anyhow*?”

He pushed his hands into his pockets, smiling casually. “I own the restaurant.”

“That’s impossible,” Baptiste sputtered, face paling. “This is a French-owned restaurant.”

Dante flashed him a cold smile. “Not anymore.” His gaze moved between the two of us, menace dancing in his eyes. “It’s an Italian restaurant now.”

Baptiste nodded, although his brow narrowed. “Are you going to change the name?”

Why in the fuck was Baptiste still talking to him? *Ignore the bastard, you moron*. Dante pulled up a chair at our table without an ounce of shame before waving a waitress over to ask for an appetizer tray. “I’m thinking about naming it Dandelion.” I flinched, feeling like he’d slapped me. “What do you think, Nix?”

If looks could kill, he’d be in the morgue with a tag on his toe. *“Stop calling me that.”*

His emotionless expression and the sarcastic tilt to his lips rubbed me the wrong way. He was cryptic and cruel. Clever and diabolical. Everything that I wasn’t. Especially now. I was so fucking *pissed off* at him.

The waitress showed up with a sampling of their popular dishes and placed them on the table while Baptiste stared at Dante and I stared at the tray. It looked exactly like the one we were served on our first date, minus the moonlit sky and picnic blanket.

“I hate you,” I signed, my chin wobbling.

Dante’s eyes found mine, almost tauntingly, as he grabbed my fork and stabbed—*really* stabbed—the cranberry pecan goat cheese truffle and took a bite of it. My heart raced and heat rushed into my cheeks at the onslaught of memories of how that night had ended.

Never again. I was too young and too naive back then to see the dangers of his bad-boy charm. Not anymore.

“Why?”

“You ruined my dress,” I signed, clenching my teeth.

“I’d say I improved it.” Dropping his fork with visible force, he crossed his arms. “You look good in red.”

It was ridiculous how we looked here. The three of us crammed around the small linen-covered table, Baptiste following our exchange with a bemused expression, probably hammered from all the wine he’d just poured down his throat. Me with my ruined outfit, and Dante looking like he stepped out of one of Athena’s smutty books.

One major difference though: this guy was a creepy villain.

“You’d look good in red too,” I snapped. *“As long as it was blood.”* Baptiste cleared his throat across the table, still pale and clearly confused at what was happening. I would have demanded we cut this evening short if I didn’t get the sense that was exactly what Dante wanted. As it may, I’d rather go on all fucking night than give him the satisfaction. *“Excuse me. I have to use… the toilet.”*

I rushed out of there with memories snapping rabidly at my heels.

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THIRTEEN

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DANTE

Did I buy this restaurant just so I could have complete control of their date?

Fuck yes, I did.

And unless this came to a screeching halt, I was about to burn the fucking place to the ground. I'd fight God for her, never mind this schmuck.

I faced Baptiste, who was still sitting at the table confused. The disdain I felt for him right now could easily be spilled into full-blown "kill you" mode unless he got the fuck out of here. I didn't like *anyone else* around her.

First strike against him.

His face was etched with discomfort, but he sure as hell wasn't standing up for her.

Second strike against him.

And then there was the way she smiled for him. She never smiled that way for me, and I fucking hated it. All I got from her were glares and the sense that she detested me.

So that was the third strike against him.

Once Phoenix disappeared into the ladies' room, I locked eyes with Baptiste. "This is how this will go," I started. "You will get up and you will leave. You'll never ask her on a date again. You'll stay away from her. You won't even look at her. You'll remove yourself from her life completely. Find a new symphony to play at. If I spot you in the same city as her, I'll beat you within an inch of your life."

"B-but—"

“No buts. Push me and I’ll fucking kill you and dump your corpse in the Seine for the fish to feed on. *Capisce*?”

He shot to his feet, his eyes bulging out of his skull, then bolted out of the restaurant, stumbling like a fool. He had no fucking idea how lucky he was to be able to walk out of here alive.

Once he was out of sight, I stood up and signaled for the restaurant manager to empty out the place. All the staff had been compensated for the remainder of the year. Depending on how Phoenix behaved, I’d either keep this place or destroy it.

There was a thrill in not knowing which way it’d go. With her, I never knew.

I made my way toward the bathroom, sticking to the shadows. When I reached it, I leaned against the wall and listened to her moving—pacing—inside, probably contemplating my murder. My lips tugged up.

Bring it on, dandelion.

She exited the bathroom and came to a halt, spotting me. Even in the dark hallway, I could see her eyes flash angrily, those blue flames tempting me. I offered her my most charming smile.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

Her jaw clenched. *“Get lost, Dante. If you don’t, Baptiste and I will go somewhere else. I’d rather eat off the subway floor than anywhere around you,”* she angrily signed.

I pushed my hands into my pockets, then slowly walked around her. At six foot three, I had at least a head on her, but the way she carried herself made her appear taller.

I stopped when I faced her. “Your date left.”

She let out an exasperated breath and I heard her mutter softly, “Asshole.”

The girl could mutter that very clearly. I let my gaze travel over her red-stained ivory dress, her thigh playing peekaboo with me. Fuck, she was gorgeous. “I’m sorry, did I ruin your date?” I mouthed slowly.

“Yes.”

I grinned, then signed, “Let me make it up to you.”

She flipped me off in the universal language. Lovely, she must *really* like me.

“I’d rather eat nails than sit at that table, looking at your pretty face,” she signed with a grim expression.

My lips quirked into a smile as I leaned closer, inhaling her scent deep into my lungs. “I knew you couldn’t resist me and my pretty face, dandelion.” She let out an exasperated breath, but before she could sign anything, I continued. “You’re into me, Nix. And I’m into you. Let’s just skip all of this and make it official, shall we?”

“You’re batshit crazy,” she signed, annoyance flaring in the delicate lines of her face. *“I’m messaging Baptiste and going home with him.”*

My fingers wrapped around her wrist in the next breath. “In that dress… No, I don’t think you are.” She shot me a glare marbled with confusion. “That dress says fuck me.”

She lowered her eyes to it, then returned them to me with one brow cocked. *“It’s classy.”*

I clenched my jaw. “Maybe, but it still says fuck me. And if he lays a finger on you, I’m going to end his existence.” Then to ensure she understood me, I added, “And, sweetheart, I don’t speak metaphorically.”

“God, I hate you.”

“Keep telling yourself that, dandelion. Besides, it turns me on. Now, let’s have a date.” I gave her my most charming smile, the kind that women usually went for. Something passed her expression, and suddenly she was smiling.

Fuck!

It actually worked!

I took her chin between my fingers, her skin soft under my thumb and index finger. She leaned closer, and my heart began to pump harder, shooting straight to my dick.

Her cheeks flushed as she batted her dark lashes. Her kissable lips parted and she moved her head, taking the pad of my finger between her lips. I stopped breathing for a moment, her tongue darting out to lick my finger, sending my brain into overdrive.

Goddammit.

My body buzzed with warmth and her scent wrapped around me in the most fucking familiar way. Almost as if I’d once held her naked body against mine.

Then she bit my finger, and fuck, she did it savagely. Her teeth scraped against my skin and my dick twitched painfully.

“Fuck, now I want you even more.”

Her eyes widened, staring at me like I was her damnation. Or the monster from her nightmares.

"Sicko," she signed, shaking her head and strutting away.

Why was it that I was always watching her walk away from me?

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FOURTEEN

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PHOENIX

My frustration took on a form of its own, taunting me with a million what-ifs.

I wouldn't allow myself to be fooled again, no matter how alluring his promise of sin was.

I rushed out of the restaurant and was merely twenty feet away when the dark sky lit up. I whirled around on my heel to find the restaurant engulfed in flames.

Frozen, I gasped in shock, not believing my eyes. Dante strode casually toward me, flames burning at his back and his hands in his pockets. He looked like Hades, strolling leisurely out of hell.

The man was… I didn't even think psychotic was the right word for him. What in the fuck happened to him?

My pulse drummed in my veins, and with each step he took, I wondered if I should run. Except, he'd give chase, *that* I didn't need to wonder about. I still remembered how much he thrived on the cat-and-mouse game. A shudder rolled down my spine as I worked hard to keep the memories at bay.

"Too young. Too stupid. Too blind." Those were the words Grandma screeched at the top of her lungs.

I had never been so happy to prove her wrong.

Dante's cabin at Lake Tahoe, surrounded by Douglas firs and glassy aquamarine waters, was our haven. It was where I lost my virginity to him, where we always came to explore each other's bodies and get lost in pleasure.

It looked even more breathtaking tonight beneath the blood moon. Almost magical. The mossy scent of the damp forest floor infiltrated my senses and left me in an intoxicated state. Though, it had nothing on the way I responded to Dante's smell.

"Nothing will ever keep me away from you," he mouthed, watching me with adoration. "You and our baby." His big palm came to rest on my lower belly. "The three of us will dance through life together. You're it for me, dandelion. Fuck my father; fuck the entire world. No one will ever stand in our way. You and our baby are my priority."

I couldn't believe my happiness. The news of my pregnancy had gone from terrifying to the single best thing that had ever happened to me. It also made me extremely emotional, and his words were going to turn me into a blubbering mess if I didn't cut them short.

"What if I ran?" I signed, pulling my lips between my teeth when he tightened his hand on my belly, dangerously close to my ticklish ribs. He had to know I was teasing—nothing and nobody would keep me away from him. We might be young, but we'd make it work.

A minute of silence enveloped us as he looked at me like he was ready to feast on me. His eyes were dark blue pools, hungry with lust and raw emotion.

I'd never dreamt of this sense of belonging, at having such reverence be directed at me.

"I'd chase you to the ends of the earth," he vowed, then shoved his face against the side of my throat, licking a hot stripe down the column of my neck. He tugged me against his chest, my body slamming against his and crushing my breasts.

His hard cock pressed against my stomach as he took my mouth for a claiming kiss. Animalistic and intense. His tongue battling with mine. My teeth clashing against his.

It was crazy that only a few months had brought us here. Sizzling physical attraction to this emotional connection.

He wrenched his lips from mine, leaving only an inch of space between us.

"I'm going to claim every hole, dandelion. Every hole of yours will be mine. Your pussy. Your mouth. Your ass. Every fucking one of them." I was no expert on cocks, but he was very well endowed. There was no way that I

could take him in my ass. His fingers threaded in my hair, angling my head so our gazes met. “Are you contemplating rejecting me?”

God, I loved his lips. Sometimes when he talked, it was hard to focus on the words he was uttering when all I wanted to do was kiss him. Again and again.

“Are you, dandelion?” he asked again, and I shuddered, my heart trembling with nerves.

I shook my head, putting space between us. His fingers loosened from my hair, both of us grinning like two fools in love.

“You’ll have to catch me first,” I mouthed slowly since he didn’t know ASL, then bolted across the cabin.

I flung the door open as inexplicable energy coursed through me. It was the thrill of being chased. I could feel his eyes on my back. I chanced a look over my shoulder, seeing the predatory smile on his face as he closed the distance between us.

Despite the absolute faith in him and knowledge that he wouldn’t hurt me, I had to fight to keep my limbs from seizing. I ran faster, feeling him get closer until I knew he was delaying catching me on purpose. The thrill of the chase, I supposed.

I flicked a glance over my shoulder. He was right behind me, and I smiled, anticipating he’d catch me soon. I turned around and sped up.

My harsh breathing burned my lungs. I wasn’t into running. Yoga was my choice of poison, and that was only because of my little sister.

The thud, thud, thud against my rib cage increased in speed and I turned around, my steps falling short. He was nowhere to be found.

My eyes roamed over my surroundings, waiting. I swallowed hard when I spotted him. He was leaning against the tree in front of me, his legs crossed and a wide grin on his face.

“How did you get ahead?” I signed, breathing heavily.

His eyes shone with darkness, something twisted and thrilling in their depths. “I’ll always be in front of you,” he said, slowly making his way toward me. “After all, I have to eliminate any threat to my woman.”

Gosh, it made me so hot and bothered when he was this way. A gorgeous monster.

“You own a thousand acres around us here,” I reminded him, trying hard not to turn to mush. “Nobody would be crazy enough to intrude.”

“Oh, dandelion. There are plenty who would be. They’d want to see the way I capture and ravage you on the soft forest floor. You don’t want anyone watching us, right?” I frantically shook my head. “That’s right, because anyone who sees you naked will be blinded. Or better yet… dead.”

Chills covered my body, the tightening between my legs intensifying with each passing second. I knew him well enough by now to know he wasn’t joking. Dante could be intimidating when he wanted to be, but my body came alive for him.

“Are you dripping wet for me right now?” He towered over me, the thrill of the chase giving his expression a slightly unhinged look. “Will your little body writhe beneath me when I take you here?”

I nodded, my mouth drying from excitement. Was something wrong with me? No, I wouldn’t go there. No doubts. No shame. Just the two of us—soon to be three.

“You’re going to be a good girl for me, aren’t you? My best girl?”

I licked my lips, my gaze lowering to his trousers. The bulge in his pants told me he liked this—a lot. “Yes.”

He was a predator, but he was mine. I trusted him with my life. I was drawn to him in ways I didn’t understand, and I’d given up trying.

My back hit the tree, his arms caging me in from both sides. His hand came around my waist while his erection pushed against my stomach.

The cool air crackled with tension as his cock rubbed farther down against my sensitive flesh, our clothes adding to the friction.

He pulled my top over my head, revealing the lace of my bra.

“Red looks good on you,” he said, then leaned in to brush our noses together. It was his favorite color; I only wore it for him.

My shaky fingers hooked around his neck, tugging on the strands at his nape.

He pulled the straps of my bra over my shoulders, baring myself to him, his fingers gliding over my breasts. My nipples ached with need as his thumb and forefinger pinched hard, twisting and tugging. A moan vibrated in my throat as a zap of pleasure shot through me and pooled in my pussy.

He cupped both of my breasts, his big, veiny hands covering them. It was as if every part of me fit perfectly against him. His big body against my small one. His strong hands against my breasts. His mouth against mine.

He pinched a nipple and I arched against the bark of the tree, into his touch.

Stroking every inch of my breasts, he bent his head, taking one nipple between his teeth. A vibration traveled from his lips to my skin and straight to my core.

He tugged on my nipples with his teeth, using brutal force, then licked the sting of pain away. He was a caring and intense lover, a demanding partner. His teeth grazed my nipple and I sucked in a breath, the movement leaving me hazy and my legs trembling.

He reached into my shorts, his hand making its way into my underwear. I bit my lip as his fingers brushed against my clit, sending a shudder down my spine. Then he slid them inside me and my inner walls clenched around them, greedy for him. I was drenched, ready for him to take me.

It took him no time to get rid of my clothes. Slinging my bra the rest of the way down my body, my shorts and panties followed, discarded carelessly on the forest floor.

He rubbed his fingers and his erection against my pussy. I tugged on his strands, pulling his mouth away from my breasts, and our eyes connected. My heart pounded fast and strong against my chest. "I need you inside me," I mouthed.

His hold on my neck tightened slightly, not enough to cut the oxygen, but just enough to exhibit control. He shoved his knee between my legs, slapping them apart and thrusting his thigh against my core. The lack of oxygen turned me light-headed, making my senses heighten to an extent I'd never felt before.

My eyes drooped. The scent of deep woods, leather, and pines swam all around us. Dante Leone was the source of my every fascination.

My hands clawed at any part of him I could reach. I needed to feel his flesh under the pads of my fingers.

His mouth was on my neck, sucking on my fluttering pulse with the savagery of a wild animal.

The stormy blues of his eyes turned a shade darker, and I knew what that meant. He'd throw me down and fuck me any moment now. His free hand touched me everywhere—my breasts, my neck, my mouth—leaving pleasure in its wake.

He tilted his head down until his lips nearly touched mine, my reflection staring back at me in his beautiful eyes.

I dripped all over his fingers, rocking my hips against him, chasing my pleasure.

Dante paused, pulling his shirt over his head and revealing the hard planes of his abs and stomach that I'd grown addicted to touching. His front was clear of tattoos, but he had a single one on his back. The Omertà tattoo.

He proceeded to remove his jeans and boxers with ease, taking his time while my pussy dripped with arousal.

He stepped toward me with the grace of a panther. I placed a shaky hand on his chest, smoothing my fingers over his abdomen and sculpted muscles.

He was caressing my nipples again, sending more pleasure than pain through me. Then, in one move, he hauled me up, lifting my leg higher to thrust inside me in one ruthless go.

My breath hitched as I hooked my ankles behind him. I wanted him with twisted depravity, and I now saw that same emotion staring back at me.

"This is my pussy." Thrust. "My property." Thrust. "Fucking mine." A strangled gasp spilled from my throat as my core tipped toward release. His fingers grabbed my chin and he forced me to meet his gaze. "Eyes on me when I fuck you."

My eyes shot wide open, clashing with his.

"Fuck," he grunted. Tears slid down my cheeks as the most intense pleasure pooled between my legs.

We lowered both our gazes, watching the in and out of his cock covered with arousal as he rammed into me. His intensity increased with each passing second. His strength made me quiver, the rocking of his hips harder with each thrust.

He touched me with such dominance that the only thing I could do—wanted to do—was to surrender to him. Just like I always did.

With each thrust, he went deeper, harder. The erotic friction built higher and higher. Then he hit a secret spot, once, twice. My mouth opened in a wordless cry before the world tumbled.

He pounded into me through my orgasm, my walls clenching his cock. The beat of my heart jumped and raced. I panted, trying to keep up with his rhythm.

I closed the distance between us, my lips brushing against his. It always surprised me to find them so soft. His lips trapped mine, sucking and bruising them. He grunted as his hips jerked, then his cock was twitching and twitching, releasing inside of me.

My head fell back. The world faded. The breeze caressed my heated skin, enveloping us in an invisible hug. Two lovers looking forward to the future.

He carried me back to his cabin, closed the door, and then ran a bath for me. He washed the cum off my body, and then he washed my hair. When he was done, he kissed me under the spray of the water until I was begging him for more.

More of everything.

That was the last time I saw him before he ghosted me.

His hands on my shoulders startled me. “Ready?”

I jerked, closing my eyes. His skin on mine burned, the raw power that emanated off him tying my core into knots.

I stared as fire engines passed us by, their final destination the raging inferno of the restaurant that wouldn’t be salvaged, judging by the flames.

“You okay?” he asked, his fingers still curled around my elbow. Who would be okay after the disaster he’d just caused? Fucking nobody.

I shook off his touch like it was the plague, then rushed away from him. The seconds ticked by, and my pulse began to thud even harder, a sheen of sweat glistening on my back. I could blame the summer heat in Paris, but I feared it had more to do with the man who always seemed to be there.

He caught up to me. His big hand took mine and I closed my eyes, taking a slow breath. God, how I loved when he held my hand. *Don’t go there,* I told myself and yanked my hand out of his grip.

I had to fortify my walls or else this psychopathic sadist, however gorgeous, would destroy me the next time around. Dante was a monster who liked to toy with women and then leave them in the lurch.

Maybe he’s sadistic and enjoys taunting me, my mind whispered. Well, duh. Of course he was. The bottom line was that I was such an insignificant part of him that he’d rather not acknowledge our time together two years ago.

And I still wanted him. How degrading was that?

He was brutal, cruel, and possibly insane. I was done shedding tears for him. All my longing now belonged to a tiny human being that was somewhere out there in the world. I needed to find my baby. I couldn’t live without knowing whether my child was happy. Grandma refused to tell me anything. She said it was confidential and she had to sign an agreement, swearing she didn’t know.

Well, fuck that.

This was no longer about me or him, my family or his. This was about doing whatever it took to find my child. It was my job to protect my baby, and I'd failed.

A shadow came up to me and I startled, forgetting all about Dante who was still following behind me.

"What do you want?" I signed, angry at the way my stomach fluttered. He looked good, the sculpted muscles barely concealed by his three-piece suit. He looked like the picture of sophistication, but you'd be a fool to miss the raw strength and danger lurking under the surface.

"Forgot I was here?" he signed, shaking his head incredulously, as if that offended him. *Jesus Christ!* I couldn't even believe his brazen attitude. He abandoned me while pregnant and here he was, being reckless with my emotions, ruining my evening, *burning down a restaurant*. And all the while, he didn't even dare broach the subject of our shared history.

I could confront him, but then what would that do? Show my desperation, my bleeding, pathetic heart? No, it was best I didn't bring it up. He wasn't worth it.

I resumed walking, his step in sync with mine. He pulled out a cigarette, apparently a habit he picked up over the last two years. His stubbled jaw was impressive even with the cigarette in his mouth, despite the fact I found the habit revolting.

"You shouldn't smoke," I found myself signing. *"It's a slow death."*

Not that I care, I tried to convince myself. In fact, getting rid of him would be one less monster in this world.

"So you do care," he stated, a lazy grin splayed out on his face.

I flicked a glance over my shoulder to the blazing flames that the firemen were trying to extinguish, then shook my head.

"Don't flatter yourself."

I resumed walking until his next question almost caused me to miss a step. "What is your problem with me?"

I didn't know whether to be offended or furious that he would even ask.

"We don't have enough time to cover all that."

"Jesus." He pushed his other hand through his hair as he inhaled another puff of smoke. "I thought you'd be partial to me since, you know, I saved you when you and your sister broke my mother's vase."

I rolled my eyes. *"As if my papà would have let anything happen to us."*

Although sometimes I wondered. He left us in Grandma's care. He was rarely around. Whenever we needed him, he wasn't there.

He raised an eyebrow and the cigarette in his mouth twitched. "You really think so?"

No, I didn't, but I certainly wouldn't be admitting that to him right now.

We continued walking in silence for a bit. His strong fingers tapped incessantly against his thigh as we walked, almost as if he had so much energy bubbling inside him, he'd erupt any minute.

"You remind me of dandelions." This time I tripped, and I would have fallen on my face had his fingers not curled around my elbow, digging into my flesh to hold me up. "Stop being clumsy," he signed, annoyance clear on his face.

I stopped abruptly, turning to face him and bumping into him instead. I braced my hand on his stomach and heat burned through his white dress shirt. Gosh, his abs had to be rock solid. My fingers unwillingly curled into the muscles, and for a moment I feared I'd pull him closer to me.

"*What did you call me*?" My hands shook and my anger simmered, but sanity prevailed and I stepped back. He was either too blind to see it or didn't give a shit. Probably the latter.

His eyes narrowed as he slowly walked around me, his appraising gaze leaving tingling trails in its wake.

"Dandelion," he signed. "The flower is resilient, symbolizing survival and rebellion." My heart climbed into my throat. "I want to fuck you." Heat flooded my face, my own emotions giving me a whiplash. An outrageously inappropriate throb pulsed deep within my core, making me clench my thighs the second he signed the next words. "I'll make it good for you."

His hand tightened around mine, making my pulse jump as he pulled me closer. My breasts pressed against him and a shiver rolled through me. He lowered his head, then ran his face up and down my neck.

I rose to my tiptoes to nuzzle his neck, my lips brushing the skin, and inhaled his scent deep into me. Before I realized what I was doing, my lips moved over his neck, kissing, licking, then sucking his jugular.

It was a familiarity that was like a punch in my gut, but this wasn't about my depraved desires. This was about setting boundaries. So I'd do what was necessary to get the point across.

I reached for the mace in my purse. A rush of endorphins roared through my system, but I ignored them. My thumb flicked the switch, then

in one motion, with his hands still around me, I closed my eyes and sprayed him in the face.

"What the *fuck*—" His hand dropped from my body.

I took three steps away, pushing off of him. His jaw clenched. His eyes were rapidly turning red.

Then, without time to waste, I turned around and disappeared into the darkness.

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FIFTEEN

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DANTE

This. Woman.

She'd either be my greatest love or my biggest downfall. There'd be nothing in between. Not when it came to Phoenix Romero.

When she touched me, I just about lost it. It had been fucking months—years—since I'd felt anything but pain, but when her mouth pressed against my neck, the pain melted. In its place was peace, warmth… something familiar that I couldn't name.

My knees almost buckled, the need to get down on them and beg her to kiss me, touch me, *anything* was so overwhelming.

As long as she didn't leave me.

I stood there blinded by mace, not comprehending her viciousness toward me. I'd seen her with other people while I followed her like a creep. She was pure sweetness and smiles for everyone else.

Although she did kiss me, I thought victoriously. If her lips on my neck were enough to get me hard, I couldn't even imagine how good it would feel to have her naked body pressing against mine.

The warm night felt even hotter with the burning I felt on my face. My pain tolerance wasn't what you'd call normal. Something tripped in my brain two years ago, and while I didn't remember my capture, I knew that my threshold for pain was no longer the same. Unfortunately, my eyeballs refused to see through pepper spray.

I blinked, and all I got was blurriness.

The buzz of the city was all around me. I could risk making my way to my flat, but I'd probably get run over by some Parisian.

I pulled out my phone. "Call Cesar," I grumbled into the speaker.

I sure as fuck wouldn’t stand here until this fucking burning ceased.

“Boss.”

“Pick me up at Champs-Élysées, a street away from Place de la Concorde. Come in a car, alone.” I didn’t need to be explaining this shit to Amon. He was all wrapped up in the blonde sister and would probably demand I didn’t upset her by stalking Phoenix. *Well, no can do.*

I ended the call, then fumbled as I asked Siri to dial up a bakery that was known for the best croissants in the city. I might as well make myself useful while I stood here blindly.

She might be giving me hell, but I’d give her chocolate croissants and then maybe she’d be nicer to me the next time she saw me. *Fat chance*. But I was nothing if not persistent.

Five minutes later, I had a delivery lined up for tomorrow morning and was hanging up just as Cesar pulled up.

“You look like shit,” he deadpanned, although he must be still in the car since I didn’t hear the doors open or close.

“Still better looking than you,” I drawled. “Now, would you open the door for me so I’m not walking around with my hands up in the air?”

I could hear his snort from here. “Sure thing, princess. Coming right up.”

Would it be too reckless to pull out my gun and shoot him right here? I could blame it on a temporary bout of insanity. Father would go ballistic—added bonus. Amon would be annoyed. I sighed.

Looked like I’d be sparing Cesar for Amon’s sake.

The door unlocked and I could hear his heavy boots against the pavement as he came around the car.

“Would you like me to hold your hand and help you in?” There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice, and I certainly didn’t need my eyes to flip him off. The passenger door opened and I braced myself on top of it, then cautiously slid into the seat.

Once he was back behind the wheel, I could feel his curious eyes on me.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“No,” I gritted. “But don’t tell anyone anything or it will be your funeral.”

He let out a sardonic breath. “Okay, boss. But I gotta tell you, that woman… whoever she is… she doesn’t love you. Hell, she doesn’t even want you.”

And that pissed me off even more than getting pepper-sprayed.

“We’ll see about that,” I muttered.

I couldn’t stop wanting her, and while a woman’s rejection was a novelty for me, I suspected it had nothing to do with the challenge and everything to do with *her*. She calmed the demons inside me, kept them at bay.

There was a darkness in her that resembled my own. A pain that mirrored my own. She was beautiful but broken. I was convinced we were meant to be broken together.

I was determined to claim her and keep her all to myself.

I stood in the kitchen and laid my hands flat on the countertop to prevent myself from hurling something into the wall. I could hear Father and my adoptive mother arguing. It was nothing new, but it bothered me nonetheless.

I was livid. So angry that my muscles turned to lead and weighed my back down. Maybe they were on to something when they said heavy burdens were carried on one’s shoulders. I fought the urge to end my father, once and for all. Maybe I’d bury him six feet under while he was still alive. Let the worms eat him. He deserved nothing better.

But I knew Mother wouldn’t appreciate it. Nor would the Omertà approve of such a blatant snatch of power. Although, in my case, killing Father had nothing to do with power and everything to do with hate.

Crash.

That was *enough*. I exited the kitchen and stormed into the living room where it looked like a cyclone had ripped up everything in the eye of its devastation. The energy in the room instantly shifted, plummeting quicker than a roller coaster.

I found my mother’s eyes. There was still fire in them, but the bruises were already forming. Sweat glistened on her forehead and her body began to tremble. Damn him!

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice stern and emotionless.

“It’s my home,” I stated casually as I made my way farther into the room, the broken glass crunching under my boots. I wished they were his bones. I could almost taste the sick satisfaction I would get from it.

One day, I pacified myself.

I spared him a glance, noting the fury that flashed across his eyes. A hatred so deep it was part of his very DNA.

I never understood why he hated me so much. He wanted a son, and he got two, yet all he did was beat us. Although sometimes I swore he hated me more than Amon.

Maybe it was because I was his replica, albeit bigger and stronger. Or maybe it was because I was a living reminder that he’d been forced to marry my birth mother. He despised being stripped of control in any aspect of his life, yet it was my birth mother who’d paid the ultimate price. No woman came out unscathed once Angelo Leone fixed his attention on them.

“It’s not your home yet,” he spat. Sometimes I thought the man would live to be a hundred just to spite us all. “It won’t be yours until I’m dead.”

“That can be arranged,” I offered, leveling him with a practiced look of indifference. *It’ll make all my dreams come true, old man.*

His upper lip pulled over his teeth viciously as he came to stand in front of me and his hand reached for my throat.

Come on, old man. I could get away with using self-defense as an excuse. He just had to be pushed a bit more. I flexed both hands at my sides and twisted my neck left and right, relishing the way steam seemed to puff out around his ears. *There it is, take the bait*.

“Stop it,” Mother hissed, abruptly coming to stand between us. “Both of you.”

For a few heartbeats, Father stood still, probably contemplating how to overpower us both. He couldn’t though. I wasn’t a little boy anymore. I might have lost my memories, but I didn’t lose my will to fight. In fact, that had come back tenfold.

With a disgusted look on his face, he turned on his heel and disappeared out of the room. Once I was certain he was out of earshot, I scolded my mother softly. “Why did you get between us? Let him lose his shit so I can get rid of him once and for all.”

She waved her hand and clicked her tongue. “Always so quick to resort to violence.”

I shot her a look, cocking a brow. “Why would you even want to keep him alive? The man’s a scumbag. Abusive. Evil. He preys on the weak.”

She might not have been my biological mother, but she always treated me as such. I had never been deprived of her love. And for that, I’d forever be grateful to her, which meant she had my protection by default.

“Don’t let him get the best of you,” she said softly.

“He was asking for it,” I retorted dryly. “After all, it’s been two decades and the fucker still roams this earth. I’m getting impatient.”

Mother’s love was the only affection Amon and I had ever known. My own mother died giving birth to me, or so I was told. The whispers I’d heard growing up were that she killed herself. When I’d asked Mother, she brushed me off and said speaking of the dead wasn’t wise. There was only one change in the way Mother treated Amon and me—she went harder on him, claiming he’d have to overcome greater hurdles because he was the illegitimate son.

“I know, but killing him isn’t the answer,” she explained, cupping my cheek gently. Outside of my mother, there was only one other woman whose touch didn’t repulse me. In fact, I craved it, which was unusual. But apparently she was disgusted by me. Oh the fucking irony. “That will only stain your soul.”

I scoffed, then walked over to the window that overlooked the sea. This castello in Trieste could be a sanctuary—key phrase being *could be*—if only that fucker were dead. The only reason I loved it was because it belonged to the woman who had birthed me. I didn’t know much about her aside from whatever sparing details Mother had shared. She’d apparently been sickly and mostly bedridden for the last two years of her life before having me and passing away.

“Don’t you think my soul is already stained, Mother?”

Her soft footsteps approached, the evidence of her own horrors crunching at her feet. “No, Dante. It’s not. Have you remembered something?” I shook my head. “Have you and Amon made any progress with Tomaso?”

I shook my head, instantly feeling guilty for forgetting about the damn document my mother had us searching for. It hadn’t crossed my mind once since crossing paths with Romero’s oldest daughter.

All my attention had been focused on *her*. I even stayed in Paris more than usual so I’d be close to her, finding solace in her proximity. Watching

her was my new favorite thing to do. The way her dark hair caught different shades of chestnut, auburn, and brown under the summer sun. The rare moments it would catch in her eyes and turn them liquid blue stole my breath.

“Dante, did you hear me?” Mother’s voice interrupted my fixation on Nix.

“I’m sorry, Mother. I got distracted. What was that again?”

“Are you staying for a while?”

“No, I have to get back to Paris. And I prefer to stay away from him,” I said pointedly.

I never felt at ease here. Now, if I were finally given the green light to rid the property of Father’s wrath? That would be a different story. I glanced around me. Nothing but a vast, blue sea in front of me and rough, rocky hills behind me. I always opted to stare at the blue horizon. I’d started to do it when I met Phoenix Romero all those years ago. She was eight and I was twelve. When her crystal blue eyes met mine, I decided I’d never give up this place. I could remember vividly thinking that one day, I’d bring her into my castle and throw away the key.

Of course, I’d forgotten all about that until we crossed paths again. As was the story of my pathetic life these days.

“What’s got you so distracted?”

Phoenix Romero. She was all I thought about lately. I couldn’t get her out of my fucking mind, even if I wanted to. The scary part was that I didn’t.

But for some reason, I didn’t want to tell her about the Romero girl. Mother’s hate for Tomaso Romero extended to anything he was associated with, so naturally his daughters wouldn’t be in her good graces.

“Don’t worry about that.” I even managed to twist a smile for her.

“You never answered me about whether you remembered anything else,” she pointed out.

I shook my head, clearing it of a certain dark-haired woman who seemed to consume all my thoughts lately.

“Remember what?” I asked.

“From the time of your captivity.” Every time she broached the subject, agony and fear crossed her expression. I hated that she suffered and worried about it. I remembered nothing, and even when nightmares plagued me, they were never specific. Only ever shadows.

I returned my eyes to the stretch of blue beyond the castle. “No. Nothing.”

Her hand came to rest on my back. “One day you will.”

Truthfully, I wasn’t sure that I wanted to remember.

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SIXTEEN

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DANTE

Another week had gone by since my last interaction with Phoenix. I had made my intentions clear to the fucking world—hands off Phoenix Romero.

But then she started fucking with me.

I brought the cigarette to my mouth and inhaled a puff of smoke. The taste hit my tongue, filling my lungs, and I blew it back out, immediately relaxing.

Parisians passed me by, rushing to their homes, dates, or nightlife as I stood outside Phoenix's apartment, watching her shadow flit around her bedroom.

I'd been following her as usual, back and forth from her apartment to her rehearsals. It was second nature to shadow her every move and lurk in the darkness, although now I knew she was aware of my presence. All the better. I couldn't give a fuck about hiding my tracks.

She might as well get used to me watching her, because she'd be mine. *Eventually.* I had no fucking clue why she fascinated me. Maybe it was the sadness in her eyes or the way pain marred her face when she thought nobody was watching. The woman was an expert at keeping her facade firmly in place.

And then there was this stubbornness she insisted on when it came to this attraction between us. She'd rather spite me and go on more dates. Most men bolted the moment I uttered my first threat, but this last one… or rather the first one… was back. Fucking Baptiste.

Not only did he touch that which didn't belong to him, but he blatantly ignored my warning and went on a second date with her.

He’d be dealt with.

I blew out the smoke, flicking the ash off the cigarette, but it was impossible to shake off the ash that dried my mouth.

Propped on my bike, I watched her window, waiting for her figure to appear. I didn’t even bother hiding or finding a discreet spot. She knew I was stalking her, and she continued to taunt me.

With her dating life. With the smiles she suddenly bestowed on the men in her ensemble. Jesus, I wanted to murder the entire orchestra.

Phoenix stepped into the window, wearing little shorts and a tank top. Her wet hair cascaded down her back, past her shoulders. Her eyes drifted over the street, and I wondered if she was looking for me.

You’d think she’d have learned her lesson after what happened at Sphere, but no. She had to test me. Fury shot through my veins all over again, remembering how she’d sat across the table from her date tonight, staring at him. How she ignored everyone—the entire fucking world—as though he were the most interesting piece of shit to ever utter the words *filet de boeuf.*

And when they parted, that fucker touched her ass.

Touched. Her. Ass.

I was so close to walking up to them, slicing his throat, and then fucking her in the mess of his blood. Before I could act on it though, she left him and headed home. Aborting my plan, I opted to follow my woman home instead.

But no matter, I’d still make him pay. Right after I ensured Phoenix was tucked safe and sound in her bed.

I clenched my fists at my sides, the voices demanding I show her exactly what she denied us both. Who she belonged to. She was mine, always had been and always would be.

The outline of her body shifted and I followed it. Her eyes found me and my breath caught in my lungs. She stood still, too fucking far away from me. I could feel the sizzling attraction even with the distance separating us, but I could also feel how much she hated me. *Why?* Why did she hate my guts?

My molars ground together, and I resisted throwing my helmet across the street. I’d wanted to fuck her since the first night I saw her in the club. She’d sealed the deal when she performed her little act of self-care, knowing I was watching. But it was more than that.

She wanted me too. Deep down, I knew it. If only she'd come to the same conclusion and meet me halfway. Sooner rather than later, ideally.

I didn't know how long I'd be able to keep my impulses at bay.

Then the lights went off in her room and I revved my motorcycle.

I was about to purge the energy buzzing through my veins.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't be between Phoenix's thighs, but I was told beggars couldn't be choosers.

It turned out Baptiste was a coward who had some pull. Not that it fucking mattered.

I shook out my fists, loosening out the restlessness binding my nerves.

"He has five men watching his manor outside." Cesar's voice came through the earpiece. "Three guards inside." That should be a piece of cake. I cracked my neck, letting my bones pop. Tension released and my shoulders relaxed. "Are you sure this is smart?"

I scoffed. *Smart?* What good was smart when the fucker placed his hand on Phoenix's flesh? On her ass. Granted, she smacked his hand away, and judging by her expression, she was pissed off at him. *Probably as a result of their ruined date*, I snickered to myself. She blamed him and me.

"We'll pick off the guards outside first," I said instead. We were hidden in the shadows on the opposite side of the manor, ensuring both angles were covered. We both had perfect views for sniper shots.

Baptiste's mistake was thinking he could beat me at my own game and outsmart me, relying on his guards to protect him. *Think again, motherfucker*.

I wasted no time. One by one, we picked them all off. This was almost too easy.

Slinking up to the front entrance, I kept myself close to the wall, my steps silent against the ground. Once I reached the door, I picked the lock—again, child's play.

I turned the handle and slipped through the narrow opening. The heavy mahogany door snicked shut behind me. From what little I could make out,

the manor was sprawling. A large chandelier hung a little ways in, opening up to a dimly lit area.

It was also… flashy, just like the fucking guy sleeping in his bed on the next floor up. Gold statues. Marble floors. Bronze sconces adorning the walls. Paintings dating back a few centuries. The home was equipped with the latest technology, impenetrable for a novice.

Not for the likes of me, motherfucker. He wouldn't see me coming until it was too late.

These powerful emotions I had when it came to Phoenix felt novel, but somehow familiar. I didn't know how to describe it, but I had every intention of keeping Phoenix for myself and this guy would not stand in my way.

She didn't know it yet, but she would choose me. It was inevitable, like rain and sunshine. Trade winds and hurricanes.

I released a long breath. I yearned to pummel something into the ground. *Soon.* Then I'd show him exactly what it meant to disobey me.

It took no time to find him, the look of absolute shock on his face well worth the wait. Three of his guards surrounded him, and even they stared at me with sheer surprise. It was ludicrous seeing them all piled in the front sitting room of Baptiste's bedroom. Almost as if they were about to kick off an orgy event—Baptiste in his pajamas, his guards with shirts half open like they were modeling for a Fabio commercial.

"How did you get past the guards outside?" Baptiste uttered. "We didn't hear a thing."

"What? Don't tell me you're disappointed," I sneered. "I, on the other hand, am very disappointed at your poor choices when it comes to Phoenix."

Cesar was right behind me and hauled one of the guards by his throat. "This is the only guard left. For the moment."

My right-hand man shoved him into the wall, his teeth rattling with the force. Then he punched him between the eyes, making a grotesque mockery of his face. He attempted to struggle, but it was fruitless.

And I fucking *loved* watching Baptiste's eyes bulge out of his head, finally filling with understanding.

"Don't worry, Cesar. We have a few more to play with here." I jutted my chin in Baptiste's direction where the remaining guards stood. "Gentlemen, I haven't introduced you to my friend Cesar." I tilted my head

toward him. “The verdict is still out on whether he’s more annoying than me.”

Baptiste stared at him, then looked back at me and blurted out, “Can we talk about this?”

Cesar went into attack mode, handling the guards while my focus was on this idiot. I removed my jacket and meticulously folded it before laying it on a nearby chair and sauntering toward him. “My first attempt was a talk. That has come and gone. Now,” I said around a thin smile, bringing my wrists up to undo my cuffs, “I will follow through with my promise.”

Meaning, I’d beat him to the point of no return, ensuring he forgot about Phoenix. For-fucking-ever.

I drove my fist into his face, blood exploding all over his features and spluttering from his mouth. I casually stepped back, eyeing him coldly.

“Remind me, what did I say the last time I saw you?”

“Fuck you,” he snarled.

“Wrong answer.” I punched him again, even harder on the other cheek. He reached for his face as he wailed like a goat. The last guard standing attempted to come to his aid, but Cesar shot him in the foot.

I watched the last of the useless guards this fucker surrounded himself with stumble and fall. Despicable. Did he really think he was safe? One of the fallen guards crawled for the door, but Cesar kicked him in the gut, and the only thing that came out of his mouth was a pained grunt.

“Let’s try again,” I said with a calm I didn’t feel. “What did I tell you?”

Baptiste swallowed once, twice, then licked his lips before he said, “That you’d beat me within an inch of my life.”

I smiled despite the destructive energy bubbling inside me with the need to dish out his punishment right fucking now. I grabbed him by the collar, hauling him up in the air.

“Phoenix Romero belongs to me.” Baptiste’s eyes shone with unbounded fear. Fucking finally. He fucked up majorly and messed with the wrong person. “I’ll make you a deal.”

He jerked his head up and down, hope blooming in his eyes. I’d make sure he hurt, but I wouldn’t kill him.

I didn’t get off on violence, but I needed it to release the pent-up rage brewing within me. Violence was my purging method, and I’d searched high and low for another method to replace it with. A more peaceful one.

Like a fuck with Phoenix. My instinct flared—or maybe warned—that she'd be enough to soothe all my demons.

"Here's what we're going to do," I stated. He'd made two mistakes and there wouldn't be a chance for a third one. Fuck with me, fine. Fuck with my girl and you were a dead man. "I'll punish you for daring to come near Phoenix and having the audacity to touch her ass. There'll be no piano playing for you anymore." The guy wasn't that good anyhow. The only reason he was in the orchestra was due to a generous contribution his big brother made to the school. He bought his place, while my girl earned it.

And so, I beat the fuck out of him. I spent the next half hour breaking every single one of his fingers, then his wrists. He screamed and cursed, so I had figured he had enough energy to be waterboarded.

"I always keep my promises," I drawled as I held a bucket of water over his whimpering face.

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SEVENTEEN

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PHOENIX

I woke up with a start, a familiar scent all around.

Dante Leone, that creepy stalker, had been in my fucking room. *Again!*

I bolted every door and window and I still smelled him in my space every morning. It was freaking me out. There was no doubt that something was *very* wrong with him.

I slid out of bed, almost fighting the urge to look at my nightstand. Slowly, I turned around and cringed seeing the note and a single yellow dandelion.

My eyes jumped around the room while I let out silent curses. I stared at the note and flower like it was covered in acid.

Curling my fists, I let out a shaky breath. A week had gone by since my first disastrous date with Baptiste. A week since I'd seen that batshit crazy man and taken a can of mace to his unforgivable eyes. But the psycho stalker was still watching me. I felt those eyes on me wherever I went.

However, the fucking idiot I was, I couldn't resist pissing him off. So, I went on five dates over the past week. I was exhausted, and judging by the love note I woke up to this morning, Dante Leone was pissed off.

I plucked the flower and the note from my nightstand, clutching them in the palm of my hand and reading:

I warned you, dandelion. There are no other men for you. I hope you weren't attached to Baptiste, because he's no more.

Seething, I ripped it apart, imagining it was him I was shredding to tiny little pieces, shoving the dandelion down his throat.

I reached for my phone and shot a message to Baptiste.

Can you let me know that you're okay?

Dante wouldn't kill him. Right?

The audacity of that fucking asshole. Maybe Dante had been stalkerish and unhinged all along but I was just too naive and blind to see it.

I had only just gotten up and exhaustion was already weighing heavily on my heart. And it was all *his* fault.

Sighing, I dragged myself out of the room and to the kitchen where I found my friends. I slumped down on the barstool, meeting their curious glances. I didn't want to alarm them about my nightly intruder, so he would remain my secret.

The same as it had been two years ago.

The dull ache in my chest flared, but I quickly smothered it.

Isla clapped her hands. "Today's the day. Let's wake up Reina and surprise her with our plan."

"She got home late," Raven signed. "It will be a pain to wake her up."

"Very late," Athena added.

"Our little girl is growing up." Isla beamed. "I can't believe she's turning legal at midnight." Then her eyes found me. "You've been sleeping in a lot lately," Isla remarked, signing and eyeing me curiously.

Athena glanced over her shoulder at me with a wink. God, I hoped she didn't know anything. Keeping a secret was hard among the girls, and I didn't need them all swarming me with questions.

"Her piano practices have been going longer than usual," she signed, the wooden spoon in her hand making a mess. Reina would have a cow if she saw it.

Because I worked on shaking off a stalker on the daily, taking the long way home down dark alleys and unfamiliar paths.

"And then there are all these dates she's been going on," Raven added, smirking while sipping her coffee.

Athena was behind the counter, reading a recipe with a furrowed brow and stirring ingredients in a bowl. For some reason, she refused to give up cooking, determined to master the art.

"*What is she making?*" I signed.

“Boeuf bourguignon.” Isla winced, pressing her lips together. French beef stew. “We shouldn’t eat it. We can’t afford to get sick.”

As if she sensed our conversation behind her back, Athena whirled around, narrowing her eyes on us. “What are you talking about?” she demanded, pointing the wooden spoon at us.

Raven groaned, seeing the brownish slop drip onto the floor. “What the fuck, Athena? Put that spoon back in the bowl before Reina sees the mess you’ve made.”

“Please,” Isla begged. “I can’t handle another one of her cleaning fits.”

I reached for a clean mug and poured myself a cup of coffee. I took a long sip, my thoughts on the man I wished I could forget.

“*Let’s go wake her up*,” I finally signed. “*The train won’t wait for us, and we still have to get her packed*.”

“Everyone else packed?” Isla asked and we all nodded.

For the next thirty minutes, we ran around like idiots, trying to get Reina ready, making her room look like a tornado swept through it. I knew it was killing her to leave her space in such disarray.

Once we were back in the kitchen, I finished my coffee while Reina prepared her own cup.

“What’s bothering you?” Reina asked.

The two of us had always been close. We did yoga together, watched movies, and shopped—although I wasn’t a big fan of the latter. Unfortunately, Reina was. She could spend hours shopping for material, thread, and garments near the Champs-Élysées. I, on the other hand, was perfectly content with casual clothes.

In fact, every dress I owned was courtesy of my sister. She insisted on feminine outfits.

It meant a lot that we’d always been so close, but at times it could be annoying. Especially when I tried to keep things from her.

I waved my hand casually. “*Nothing. Just thinking about a concert*.”

Or a certain dark-haired man who betrayed me two years ago, leaving me alone to deal with Grandma and the birth of *our* child.

The girls kept talking and signing at the same time, but I no longer paid attention. My memories traveled back to the day I learned I was pregnant.

I twisted my fingers, feeling nausea rise. I couldn’t be sure whether it was the pregnancy or the fact that I had to tell my grandmother.

She strolled through the garden in her flowy white dress, looking at least twenty years younger than her seventy-two years.

When I showed up here unannounced, I didn't expect her to have a gentleman visiting. The Duke of Glasgow. It would appear the two were enthralled with each other, and Grandma played the part of a fragile English rose well.

It would be comical to watch if I weren't so distraught.

The duke, like a true gentleman, lingered five steps behind us while we walked the gardens in her Malibu home. I kept throwing subtle hints that I needed to talk to her alone, but she missed them all.

"Sisters are different flowers from the same garden." She kept rambling about the goddamned flowers. Like I gave a shit. Dante's nickname for me couldn't have been more appropriate. I was a weed, strong and resilient. He saw me for who I was, while my family insisted I needed protection. "You and your sister are going to be the brightest flowers this world has ever seen. I cannot wait to see you blossom."

It took all my self-control not to roll my eyes.

I just needed her to listen to me and be supportive. Dante was coming tomorrow and I'd tell him about the baby. I just needed her reassurance for a dose of strength before I dropped the news on my first boyfriend. I just needed to know that my grandmother would be there for my baby and me.

Grandma leaned against a column, looking like she was posing for the movies, meanwhile my nerves rattled like the rose bushes in the breeze behind us. Her eyes darted above my head and I followed her gaze to the duke. I let out an inward groan. Something told me she'd try to weave that man into her web and there'd be another wedding coming.

I was so fucking sick and tired of how many grandfathers we'd cycled through.

Her eyes came back to me. "Phoenix, darling," she signed, her lips unmoving, which was unusual. She tended to sign and speak the words at the same time. "Can you bring me a yellow rose?"

I scrunched my brows, staring at her, then at the roses, only to return my eyes to her. "Why?"

She signed, "I want to impress the duke with how considerate my granddaughter is."

I sighed in resignation, not even bothering to point out that making a show of giving her a rose wouldn't impress him. Not if he had an ounce of a

brain and saw it for the phoniness that it was.

Despite my better judgment, I lowered to my knees and plucked the rose out of the garden, ignoring its pricks, and handed it to her.

Like a true actress, she feigned surprise. Even brought her hand to her cheek and made her lip quiver while she pretended like she was about to cry.

If she didn't let me talk, we'd both be crying soon.

Grandma pushed off the column, then took my hand and led me to the nearby bench. Her perfume of fresh jasmine was never my favorite, but today it made me want to barf. Still, like a good granddaughter, I sat down and smiled.

She was a bit shallow, but she was protective, and I knew she loved my sister and me fiercely.

"Can I talk to you now?" I signed. "Or do we need to do anything else to impress the duke?"

Grandma's hand cupped my cheek while looking into my eyes. "What's troubling you, Phoenix?"

I took a deep breath in and then exhaled. There was no easy way to lead into this.

"I'm pregnant," I mouthed. She froze and seemed to remain that way for seconds, minutes. Hell, maybe even hours. "Grandma, I—"

She let go of my cheek. "Sign with your hands. I misunderstood your lips."

Wonderful. This was starting off well. I wanted to tell her she didn't misunderstand, but instead, I signed, "I'm pregnant."

"How the fuck are you going to blossom if you're knocked up?" she signed, trying to keep her face impassive while her eyes flashed with fury. "Who did this to you?"

Okay, when she behaved like that—like she wanted to commit murder—there was no chance in hell I'd give her the name of the boy who owned my heart.

"I need your help, not your judgment. Another month and I'll graduate high school, but I'll need a nanny if I'm to continue on to college."

"I'm not your nanny." She actually mouthed the words, maybe even screamed them. From the corner of my eye, I spotted the duke approaching us, but Grandma raised her hand, palm up, and he instantly stopped. "Give

me some time with my granddaughter. Go on inside and I'll catch up to you."

Oh, fuck! That didn't sound good.

Once he disappeared into the house, her stormy attention was on me. "I thought you were smarter than that. Didn't I teach you about safe sex?"

I let out an incredulous breath, trying to rein in my own temper. "No, you didn't. You haven't even taken me to an Ob/Gyn."

"I thought you kids would be smarter these days with the worldwide web at your disposal." She tugged on her impeccable chignon. "Besides, I didn't think a boy—"

I inhaled a sharp breath. She didn't think a boy—any boy—would want me. Okay, that hurt. My deafness was my weakness, yes, but not because of the actual disability. It had everything to do with the way the world viewed it.

"Well, someone does want me." I hoped it would still be in the present tense once he learned of this.

"Hearing or not, any man runs once a baby is thrown at them."

I rolled my eyes but didn't comment. There was plenty of evidence to contradict her statement.

"I don't want you to be my nanny, but I need to be able to afford one. I want part of my inheritance so I can support the baby and myself and pay a nanny who can live with us and watch the baby while I'm at school during the day."

She stared at me with her mouth open. I had never seen Grandma in this state. I wasn't sure whether it was good or bad.

"Are you fucking crazy?" Her hands trembled with fury. "Assuming the media doesn't tear me apart, your papà will. And then he'll kill both you and the baby."

She shot to her feet and started pacing. It was just a shock. It had to be. After all, Grandma got pregnant with Mamma and she was barely eighteen. I'd turn of age before I had this baby.

She came to a stop. "Too young. Too stupid. Too blind." Then she shook her head. "What did the boy do when you told him?"

"I haven't told him yet."

"You might as well tell him your papà will shoot him the minute he learns."

Worry swarmed my chest, but I quickly squashed it. Dante had had a few dealings with Papà. They could come to terms and move on from it. Besides, I was certain Dante could hold his own against my papà.

Grandma's eyes moved across my face. "You're too naive. Too trusting."

My eyes drifted to the ocean behind her house. Maybe she was right, maybe I was naive, but Dante was trustworthy.

"D—" Almost blurting out his name, I cut myself off right in time. "He'll come through."

"He won't." The certainty in her voice irked me. "You cannot keep the baby."

A sharp gasp tore from my lips while piercing pain spread through my chest. "A-abortion?"

"Phoenix, you're not even eighteen," she reasoned.

"Soon I will be," I signed. "Besides, I'm almost four months along," I lied.

She eyed me suspiciously. "You're not showing."

I shrugged. I learned that to lie successfully I had to keep it short. Otherwise, I'd dig myself in too deep.

"Tell him about the baby," she said, finally concluding our conversation. "Don't tell anyone else. Once he disappears, we'll talk about next steps."

The vibration of a chair scraping against the floorboards had me clutching my chest as I slammed back into the present. It was Reina closing the door to her room and disappearing behind it, probably to try to turbo clean.

"*When does the train leave?*" I asked the girls.

"An hour."

"*We'd better get going soon*," I signed.

"You know, I could drive us so we won't have to worry about the schedule," Raven tried.

"We're taking the train," Isla stated with panic in her eyes. "That hunk of metal keeps breaking down."

Athena glanced at me over the shoulder while she was cleaning up the last bit of a mess.

"Should I make the cake?" Athena asked. "I'm capable of making a simple one. Nothing elaborate."

“*In less than an hour?*” I signed. “*Is that even possible?*”

“Please don’t bake anything,” Raven grumbled. “I’d like to get through her birthday alive.”

“That’s right. We want Reina to survive her eighteenth birthday,” Isla added with a wry expression.

Reina returned with a phone in her hands, her eyes glued to it, and all our conversation regarding the matter ceased. She kept muttering under her breath, but I wasn’t sure what she was saying.

I tapped on the counter, drawing Isla’s attention. “*What is she saying?*”

Isla smiled. “I think she’s in love.”

I frowned, my eyes darting to her, catching Raven rolling her eyes. “I have a feeling she’s been refreshing her phone every hour of the day and night, waiting for a message from her gorgeous man.”

Amon Leone.

Goddammit. I didn’t like it.

It was wrong to judge Amon by his brother’s sins, but I knew Reina’s romantic soul as if it were my own. I didn’t want her to experience the same pain I’d gone through.

Reina’s attention was entirely on the phone while the rest of us talked. Athena gave up on her cooking and the pot boiled over. Isla scolded her, turned off the stove, and demanded she stop cooking. Of course Athena wouldn’t, but we all knew she was better at writing smut than cooking and it would probably always be that way.

I tapped Reina on her shoulder as she zoned out. “*It’s not healthy to keep checking your phone.*”

She gave me an awkward smile. “I know. I just like him a lot.”

My sister had no qualms about admitting her feelings for Amon. I had never told a soul about Dante, keeping him a secret close to my heart. Reina was different though. She would shout about her love from the top of the Eiffel Tower if she could. Thankfully, she wasn’t allowed to go to the top.

I shot to my feet. “*Okay, let’s get going or we’ll miss the train.*”

Maybe I could run away from my ghosts and creepy stalkers.

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EIGHTEEN

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PHOENIX

The birthday celebration went askew—fast.

We'd been locked up because some asshole grabbed my ass and Reina went nuts on him. I'd told her a million times I was capable of handling myself, but she was so fiercely protective. She'd always been like that, and it was partially the reason I had never introduced her to Dante back when we dated.

Well, that, and the fact that I selfishly wanted to enjoy him all by my lonesome self. I wasn't jealous of my sister or our friends, but admittedly, sometimes I felt lacking with my deafness. I worked hard to ignore it, but the feeling was still there.

Reina saved me. Amon, her knight in shining armor, came to save her. It turned out that maybe Amon Leone would come through for my little sister.

Click. Click. Click.

That familiar ache in my chest throbbed, remembering how it felt to be abandoned by him, left all alone. After he promised he would be there for me and our baby.

I shook my head, chasing the memories away. I sat on the side of Amon's yacht. It was well past midnight and everyone was asleep. Hot summer air, silver moonlight, and soothing waves were my only company as I watched the reflection of the moon glimmer over the dark water.

We were docked in Saint-Tropez.

I wouldn't have minded the yacht and Amon, but I minded Dante. Every time I turned around, he was there, watching me in a calculated way one second and unhinged the next. Almost as if he was weighing his options when it came to me.

Admittedly, the fact that I pepper-sprayed him might have had something to do with my discomfort. I was waiting for his revenge. Except, it had been a week, and it had yet to come.

Aside from his clear disregard for my privacy and invading my property by sneaking into my room what seemed like every night.

A soft commotion drifted through the air. The vibrations of firm footsteps. I sat up straight, pressing my back against the cabin but unable to stop myself from looking.

The familiar dark shadow appeared with another one in tow. I'd recognize the Leone brothers anywhere.

I held my breath, staring at the man who'd once been everything I wanted and needed. The familiarity that I thought would be my home. He fooled me once. He wouldn't fool me twice.

They snuck onto the yacht like two thieves in the night. I stared as the moonlight followed his shadow. Even the moon loved him. He was beautiful in a raw kind of way. He was breathtaking in a dangerous kind of way.

As they moved over the deck, Dante was caught by the dim light. My breath caught in my lungs. He was covered in blood, and he looked every bit the savage monster I'd feared he'd become. My stomach roiled at this version of him that had always lurked behind the facade.

He seemed different than he used to be around me. At this moment, his entire presence was tainted with darkness and he wore his ruthlessness like a second skin. He looked like a nightmare come to life.

Dante stopped and glanced over his shoulder but I pressed myself against the hull of the yacht so he wouldn't see me. Except, his dark gaze came my way.

"You go on, I'm going to have a smoke." I watched his mouth move as he spoke to Amon, who then disappeared inside. I held my breath, my heart likely bruising my ribs from how hard it was hammering. I should jump to my feet and bolt into the bedroom and lock the door. The girls were in there, and I suspected Dante wouldn't want to have witnesses.

He lit his cigarette, the burning cherry illuminating his handsome, brutal face. He made three graceful strides until he stood in front of me, so close I could feel the heat radiating off him. So close that I could smell his raw scent.

My vision dimmed, terror inflating in my throat.

“Hello, Nix. Waiting for me?” The mocking leer on his face was unmistakable.

Dread grabbed hold of my lungs, smothering each breath and pushing tremors through me.

“Why are you all bloody?” My shaking hands as I signed were contrasted by his calm and collected gestures. He looked savage even under the cloak of night, and without warning, I was on my feet and running. Where? I had no idea, but I didn’t make it far before strong arms caught me from behind.

Dante’s hand covered my mouth, his hot breath against my nape. Shivers rolled down my spine. The scent of copper mixed with his own. I hated it as much as I loved it. What was happening to me? Where was my backbone? I couldn’t let his effect on me tamper with my resolve to stay away.

Slowly, he turned me around, still keeping his hand over my mouth. “Don’t scream.” I blinked once, twice. “Promise.”

I nodded hesitantly, and the moment he removed his hand from my mouth, I inhaled a deep breath.

“Why are you all bloody?” I asked again, this time with renewed strength, my hands and voice no longer wavering.

I stared at him as he blew a cloud of smoke into my face. Then he dragged another in before releasing an even longer puff, tilting his head as if to study me.

“I had to teach someone a lesson.”

My brows scrunched. *“And that’s supposed to explain so much blood?”*

He smiled savagely.

“When he touched something that didn’t belong to him, yeah.” He brought a hand to his mouth and took another drag. “And guess what he touched, dandelion?” I remained tight-lipped. I really wished he’d stop calling me that. It only brought back bitter memories. “You.” Then he flicked the cigarette into the water and my nose scrunched distastefully. “What? Do I disgust you?”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. *“Finally you’re getting the point,”* I signed. *“So go to your cabin and shower. Leave me alone.”*

I needed to maintain some distance between us. Every time I was near him, I lost all poise and control. Even after his admission, my heart trembled, trying to claw out of my chest and leap to him.

A look of raw sadness crossed his face. “Why?” When I gave him a confused look, he added, “Why do you hate me so much?”

My heart stung with a fresh wave of bitterness and pain, and the flurry of emotions tore me apart. But I refused to let the world see, for this man to see. I closed my eyes for a moment and my face tipped up toward the dark sky. He *left* me. I could have forgiven that, but not leaving our baby behind.

“I screamed.” The tremor was back with a vengeance. *“I screamed until my throat bled. You weren’t there.”* What scared me the most was that, just like before, I wanted to hand my heart and soul over to him. I wanted him to have it all. *“Where were you?”*

He frowned in confusion and his eyes darkened, shadows flickering through them.

“What do you mean?” My stomach dropped like lead and a quiver started in my chest. Angry. Bitter. *Red.* I felt like I was going to be sick at his display of blatant ignorance.

We stared at each other, and a thick, almost suffocating tension filled the air. I wanted to ignore this anger simmering through me.

I swallowed and tried to keep my hands steady as I signed, “*Just forget it*.”

Something dark moved through his eyes as he leaned back against the rail. “No, I don’t think I will. Now, elaborate.”

Unease suddenly prickled at my skin. I went to move, but his wide shoulders blocked my path. His presence, heavy and palpable, filled the space while volatile anger poured off him. It… *he*… was freaking terrifying.

“*I’m done with this conversation.*”

I was shaking with anger. Something thick flowed through the air—his tension combined with my irritation, if I were to guess.

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Was it possible to be scared and mad at the same time? I wanted nothing more than to end this, right here and now, and yet he made it abundantly clear he wouldn’t let me go until he got an answer.

And wasn’t that rich, the fact that *I* had to give *him* an explanation. He owed it to me, along with a fucking apology. I cried myself to sleep for *months* after giving birth. He had no idea how hard it was to keep a smile on my face day in and day out, pretending to be thrilled I was back to

normal and out of the hospital, when all I thought about was my baby. The baby I never even got to hold.

But my pride was stronger than my anger.

"*Why are you always hanging around me*?" I asked instead.

His gaze dropped to my lips and a flash of something sinful in them made my heartbeat trip over itself.

"You make my heart beat faster. That's why," he answered. The sweetest words spoken with the most indifferent expression on his face. "And my dick wants you. Literally."

Frustration chafed, grating my skin raw. At myself. At him. Seeing him cut my wounds open all over again, my heart bleeding at his feet, stung more than anything.

My hands clenched, the pain of my knuckles more bearable than the one I felt inside my chest. I'd been drowning in my pain for years, and he was *right here*.

"*Stop stalking me.*"

He smiled lazily. "No." My brows creased in confusion. He was giving me whiplash. "You only talk to me when I stalk you."

I scoffed. "*That should tell you something*."

"Yes, it does. I'll wait as long as you need to come to terms with us, but you'll be mine, Phoenix Romero." His cruelty severed my oxygen as silence washed over me, warning me. Those were the words he'd given me before, except now, they didn't make my heart flutter in excitement. They filled me with bitterness. "Mark my words. You. Will. Be. Mine."

Dante Leone was like a drug. He could feel good, but he was all wrong for me. I would train my heart to resist him. To stop craving him with every breath and every thought.

I lost my hearing when I was a little girl, but I heard the drumming of my own pain as clear as day, tearing me to pieces all over again.

The deafening silence weighed me down. I was drowning in it as much as I was stained with the blood of my bleeding heart, pooling around me like invisible ink.

This storm of feelings and my desire for him made me weak. Vulnerable. Stupid.

So I ensured that my pride prevailed. *Never again.* He'd *never* hurt me again, because I wouldn't allow it.

"*I'll never be yours. I hate you.*"

I turned on my heel and left him. Just like he had abandoned *us* two years ago.

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NINETEEN

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PHOENIX

Sun bounded off the ripples of blue water, the white deck so bright even with sunglasses on that I had to shield my eyes.

I lay next to Athena on the lounge chair beside the small in-deck pool while Raven and Isla enjoyed its cool waters. I tried to focus on Athena's latest book. It was a modern retelling of the story of Venus and Eros, and the book was so hot I should be melting right on the spot. But I couldn't focus on my book when all I could feel was Dante's presence and his eyes on me.

More specifically, his eyes on the white string bikini I was wearing. The dang thing barely concealed my lady parts, but I made sure to use my cover-up whenever I was out of the water.

With Amon and Reina in their own little world, Dante had kept to himself for most of the morning. Until now. His aviator glasses hid most of his face, and his golden skin made my mouth water—as did his white swim trunks that left little to the imagination. Like this, he could pass as either the quintessential billionaire playboy or the highly trained mobster. Take your pick.

He moved confidently and with a grace that would put a panther to shame. I could spot his abs for miles underneath his T-shirt, and my cheeks burned remembering how I'd touched them. I shook my head.

Damn. Him. Damn his perfect body.

It was too much. I pretended to be engrossed in the book, but the truth was that I had yet to read a single page. I shifted on my deck chair, feeling a rush of heat all over that had nothing to do with the sun.

He greeted me, but I pretended not to see him. Damn devil then went out of his way to wave a large hand in front of my face, smiling wildly. God, I wanted to snap at him. I wanted to push him off the yacht and let him… well, not drown per se… but definitely struggle a bit.

I could feel Athena's curious gaze on me, her eyes darting between the two of us.

Forcing a smile, I tried to convey it was all good, but as Dante's gaze dipped over my body and lingered on my breasts, I felt like I was standing in hell, engulfed by its flames, and he was the one fanning them.

Athena touched me to pull my eyes to her, and I was surprised I didn't singe her with how hot I felt. "I'm going to cool off in the pool. You coming?" She flicked a glance at Dante before continuing in signs only. "I feel like there's some wordless porn going on here."

Dante choked, then brought his hand up to pound on his chest. Damn, she had no way of knowing the devil was fluent in ASL. It was too late to warn her now.

I shifted on my chair and prayed he'd leave as Athena stepped to the side of the yacht, diving into the water. It took exactly sixty seconds for the girls to abandon the pool and join her, leaving me all by my lonesome with Dante.

I swallowed and focused back on the book, ignoring his presence. I was on a beautiful ship in the South of France and this idiot wouldn't ruin it for me.

Finally, I realized that the book was just a lost cause for me, so I closed it, albeit a bit forcefully, and tilted my face to the sun, shutting my eyes. I tried to block out his presence but it wasn't easy since every hair on my body stood in awareness of him.

He tapped on my shoulder. I ignored him. He did it again. I ignored him again. Then he shook me lightly.

I lifted my sunglasses to pin him with an annoyed stare. *"What?"*

He was smiling that wicked, naughty grin. "Want me to slather your body with lotion?"

"I'd rather burn to ash than let you put anything on me."

He blinked his eyes innocently. "What else would I put on you besides lotion?" Goddammit. The tone of his voice insinuated so many dirty things. "My cum?"

And there it was. The little taunt, reminding me how I let him do that to me once upon a time. Everything inside me longed to scream and throw things at him—hurt him—but it would be for naught. So I dropped my sunglasses back in place and closed my eyes.

Of course, I couldn't keep them closed for long. My sunglasses were black, but I still peered under my lashes. His attention darted to the horizon and miles of deep blue sea that stretched before us. I found myself watching him, every smooth move as he raised a glass to his lips and licked a drop of the golden liquid off the rim.

God, the man was sexy without even trying.

My skin lit up like a live wire, the fabric of my bathing suit suddenly felt heavy, and the breeze from the sea brushed against me. He came to sit in the lounge chair previously occupied by Athena and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees.

I had to stop looking at him. It wasn't good for my health. I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting the urge to stare at the man.

Another tap on my shoulder.

I curled my fingers into fists, nails digging into my palms. Ignoring him was fruitless, because he refused to leave. I turned to him violently, almost losing my balance and falling off the chair.

"Why don't you take your own shirt off and lather yourself with all the suntan lotion to your heart's content?"

His face darkened as his body went still. "Maybe I'm shy."

I snorted. The man was anything but shy.

I still remembered how eagerly he stripped his clothes the night I gave him my virginity.

Our hearts beat as one, his against my chest and mine under his hand.

He was so fucking beautiful that it ached to look at him. Desire soaked into my skin. Heat pooled between my legs. But doubts swarmed my mind as I stood in my simple cotton bra and panties, regretting I went for cotton over lace.

"What's the matter, my dandelion?" I wasn't surprised he picked up on my worry. He always sensed my emotions.

"I'm not as beautiful as you." I groaned the moment I mouthed those words. I hated feeling insecure—about my music, my body, my worth, anything.

“You’re right.” My heart sank with his words. I hadn’t expected him to agree so readily. He cupped my face and stared right into my soul. “You’re even more beautiful.”

And just like that, he made it all right.

I clutched him tighter, his forehead against mine. My pussy throbbed. He meant so much to me. He was my first everything. The breeze swept through the open windows, but his body was hotter than a furnace.

I reached around my body to unhook my bra, but he stopped me. “That’s my job.”

A shuddering breath escaped my lungs as my heavy breasts bounced free. He inhaled sharply, his eyes darkening to deep ocean pools. I brought my palms to his chest, feeling his strong and steady heartbeat.

His fingers hooked on the hem of my panties but he paused, and I lifted my eyes to meet his. Something flickered in them, maybe hesitation.

I swallowed. “Is everything okay?”

He watched me for a breath or two. “It’s my first time too.”

My mouth parted in confusion. It couldn’t be; I must have misunderstood him. The way he touched me with expert hands and brought me pleasure when we fooled around spoke of experience.

“I didn’t understand,” I mouthed slowly. “Can you repeat?”

“It’s my first time too,” he repeated.

“Oh.” He waited, seeming to struggle with what to do. “Should we watch a video on how to do it?”

His chest vibrated with laughter and that familiar wolfish look was back in his eyes. “I didn’t say I don’t know what it takes. I’ve had plenty of coaching. I just didn’t want to do it with the women who worked for my father.”

I nodded. From everything I’d heard, his father was a cruel bastard. Maybe it was good that my own papà was an absent one.

“Well, as long as you know where to put that,” I mouthed pointedly, staring at his bulging erection.

He hoisted me up, his stomach pressed between my legs. I whimpered against his mouth as his hands gripped my ass. I dug my fingers into the back of his neck, aching with need and groaning under my breath.

My stomach tightened as he laid me onto the mattress. I stared up at him, gaze heavy, as he grabbed hold of my panties and ripped them away, the fabric stretching and tearing off my body.

I was left bare and naked, the subject of his full attention.

Dante was such an enigma, always leaving me to wonder what he was thinking. If there was one thing I could clearly see on his face though, it was his obsession, his fixation on me.

“What are you thinking about?” he mouthed slowly. “If you want me to stop, just tell me.”

Him stopping was the last thing I wanted. “I need you to touch me.”

He caught my ankle and pulled me closer, then he opened my legs and bent his head. Heat rose to my neck, cheeks, and ears as he took a long, savoring lick, tasting me. My hips bucked at the sensation while his eyes peered up at me, watching me with gleaming eyes.

My stomach somersaulted as he flipped me over, knocking the air out of me as he hauled me up on my knees. My chest pumped with shallow breaths as he caught me from behind, wrapping an arm around my waist and picking me up.

My head fell back against his shoulder, his muscled chest hot against my back. His rough hands were all over my skin, leaving marks as he touched every inch of me. Everything about him turned me on and he knew it.

This was our little world where only the two of us existed and nobody else mattered. The cool air brushed against my nipples, his hands kneading my breasts.

I gasped, my eyes fluttering shut at the pleasure zipping through me. Then his teeth sunk into my neck and I cried out, pain and pleasure mixing as my hips rolled, wanting him inside me. The heat of his mouth and his touch made my skin buzz with anticipation. He left my skin hypersensitive, desperate for more, my heart speeding out of my body like a roller coaster.

I reached behind me and touched his face, turning mine so I could offer him my mouth. He gripped my hair, yanking my head back and capturing my mouth for a passionate kiss. He bit my bottom lip, then brushed his tongue along where it stung. He moved it against mine, testing, exploring, and licking. His breaths came out harsh, like he was holding back.

I couldn’t breathe. Every cell in my body sang to his tune. He pushed my knees wider, gripped my hips, and yanked me back to him, the hard flesh of his cock pressing into me. A moan escaped me, and my inner thighs dripped with my arousal.

I watched him grab his hard, thick length, pushing the crown of it at my entrance.

A moan escaped me, and before he did anything, his eyes locked with mine. At my nod, he buried himself deep inside me, sending pain and pleasure through me, so strong that my knees quaked.

I whimpered, going rigid at the intrusion for a moment while a wave of pleasure zipped through the rest of my body, making everything tingle and buzz.

I felt his labored breaths against my back. He waited, letting me adjust to his size. I wiggled my ass against him, signaling I was ready, and he gave in to it. His fingers dug into my hips as he started pumping, hard and fast.

My hands clutched the white sheets, trying to remain on my knees, my body pushing forward as he thrust into me hard and fast, hitting my G-spot. This man didn't do gentle, but his sheer brutality and ruthlessness was what I craved.

He pulled out of me only to slam back in again. God, he felt so good. My body jerked, and he fucked me harder and faster.

I panted, licking my lips. I wanted to turn around to feel him, to feel his chest against mine, but the deeper he thrust, the faster my orgasm built. My stomach trembled and my skin tightened, fireworks sparking deep inside me before I erupted.

Lost in the height of my pleasure, he gripped my hair and pulled my head back up, taking my mouth as he pumped into me violently. The flame grew hotter, the desire stronger. A haze had infiltrated my mind, my inhibitions, and the corners of my vision as my orgasm shuddered through me with the violence of a strong current.

I swallowed his grunts and he jerked into me several more times when, with one final thrust, he spilled inside me.

Both of us breathed hard as he remained buried, spent and covered in sweat, while his fingers threaded into my hair and he sank his face into my neck. His lips hovered over my skin and licked a stripe over the shell of my ear.

He pulled out of me and I felt his cum leak down my inner thigh, making a salacious mess out of me. I felt his free hand reach between my quivering legs, his finger intercepting the wetness dripping down. He ran a finger upward, pushing it back inside my opening, drawing another shudder from me.

He brought his finger to my mouth, and without thinking, I parted my lips and sucked on it, tasting myself.

“You’re mine now,” he mouthed, his chest growling against mine.

He scooped me up into his arms and carried me to the shower where he lathered my body, massaging my achy muscles and mouthing words in the language of love.

God, I *was* stupid.

I scowled, chasing the images and memories away, and found Dante staring at me with a lopsided grin.

“Where did you go?” he asked, and when I scrunched my brows, he added, “In your mind, where did you go?”

“None of your business.” I could feel my cheeks burning with embarrassment. He was the only man I’d ever let in. I tried to get close to others, but my body refused to cooperate or work for any other man. I even tried to picture Dante when they kissed me. Zip. Nada. Not even a blip of sensation.

It was fucking embarrassing. It was the reason I kept him my dirty little secret. He was my everything, and all he did was break me. Ruin me for anyone else.

“About last night,” he signed, his movements hesitant. “I’m sorry.”

The breath was knocked from my lungs. Menacing energy bubbled in my veins, seeping through my pores. My glare met his fierce eyes. I wanted to provoke him, anger him. I wanted him to feel an ounce of the pain he’d bestowed on me.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” I signed. *“There are plenty of fish in the sea. I can find a new man whenever I want.”* Lies. Besides, if he kept chasing them away, I’d be left without any options. *“The perfect one will come along.”*

His neck bulged thickly as he worked his jaw. Good. Let him be angry. Not that he had any right to be.

One moment I was sitting and the next he had me slammed against the back of the lounge chair, gripping my neck.

“I told you, Phoenix. No. Other. Men. For. You.” He mouthed the words slowly, menacingly, and with enough pent-up tension to set this yacht ablaze. His power and savagery overwhelmed me. His scent was suddenly the only thing I could make out.

I shoved at him with all my force, barely making him budge. *“That’s where you’re wrong, Dante. There are many men out there for me.”*

“I’m it for you.”

I scoffed. *“Fuck you. I wouldn’t want you if you were the last man on earth.”*

His grin was *savage*. Diabolical. “Any dick comes near you and I’ll cut it off. If you need to be fucked, just say the word. Your wish is my command.”

My eyes widened. Dante Leone was mental. A total fucking lunatic. Adrenaline raced through my veins, pulsing out through my ears.

In an unhealthy way, the look of utter possessiveness in his eyes sent a wave of warmth between my legs. He must have read the desire in my eyes.

His shoulders relaxed and his mouth curved into a charming smile. The changes in his demeanor were jarring, setting my teeth on edge.

“We could—” He tapped his fingers against his chin pensively as if thinking hard about the best way to phrase his next words so he’d get what he wanted. “We could have an… arrangement.”

I eyed him suspiciously, my mouth suddenly dry at the way he watched me like he was prepared to devour me. *“Arrangement?”*

“You and me,” he signed. “The attraction is there. You can feel it, and so can I. We fuck, and we get it out of our system.”

Images flashed through my mind. The two of us in every position imaginable. His mouth on my most sensitive parts. His skin on mine. The feel of his flesh slapping against mine.

Goosebumps erupted over my skin. *“No.”*

“Your lips say no, but your body says yes.” I glared at him, shaking my head, and he smiled. “The way your pulse races each time I’m near you. The way you wet your lips when you look at me. You want me, and there’s nothing I want more than to spread your legs and taste your cunt.”

My eyes fell to his groin and, at the sight of his dick twitching, the throbbing between my legs intensified. Something pounded in my chest. An unfulfilled need that felt close to bursting. My palms grew clammy.

I swallowed, forcing my eyes back up. *“Why?”* I needed to know why he wanted me again. After all this time.

“My dick wants you, and that’s unusual.” It was an odd and inappropriate response.

“Sounds like a personal problem.”

He smiled, throwing all his charm at me. “Help me solve it.”

I gritted my teeth. *“You’re a jerk.”*

He grinned. “I’m a jerk who’ll make you scream my name.”

His arrogance—cold and insensitive—was exactly the dose of reality that I needed.

"No." He ruined everything good. It was obvious we were never going to be on the same page. *"Just leave me alone."*

He wanted a whore? Well, I refused to be one for him. The thorns of silence dug into every inch of my flesh, leaving me exposed and bleeding.

His hand came toward my face and I flinched, a breath escaping me when his thumb brushed across my lip and down my chin.

"When you're ready—and you will be—come find me."

He tore away from me, leaving me alone. Just like two years ago. So I did the only thing I could. I made my way to the side of the boat, and I jumped into the cold sea.

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TWENTY

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PHOENIX

My eyes shot open and I blew out a ragged breath.

It was almost midnight, and yet another night without my sister under our roof. We left the yacht two days ago and Reina was still with Amon. I didn't like it.

I got up from my bed and began to pace my room. Every time I closed my eyes, Dante's words played in my mind and his scent invaded my psyche.

I'd woken up only to find the room empty. His stalking was starting to wear on me, stretching my body thin with restless energy. The glow of the moon that came through the open curtain—because it made no sense to raise them if the man kept finding a way into my room—was working its magic on my fragile will.

I wished I were stronger, that I didn't want him, but my fantasies and carnal desires were wreaking havoc, demanding I take Dante up on his word. The persistent ache between my thighs was unbearable. My mind whispered warnings, listing all the reasons why Dante's suggestion was a bad idea.

But my body bargained. This time, I wouldn't love him. This time, I'd be the one to leave him.

My frustrated heart sent a burst of energy through me. I paced to the window and slid it open, then stepped out into the night.

A dark shadow flashed behind me and I flinched, whirling around. I nearly lost my footing, but a strong hand gripped my wrist and held me up. My chest pressed against his, and his heat seeped into me along with his overwhelming scent, stealing the breath out of me.

“Caught you,” he mouthed, his expression dark and frightening. I tried to yank my wrist out of his firm grip, but it was impossible.

A familiar sensation flared through me. *Want.*

So naturally, I attempted to knee him in the groin. Anticipating the move, he caught my leg and brought it up higher, hooking it around his hip. My chest rose and fell as I panted, mouth gaping open. Despite me being cornered, his fingers were surprisingly gentle as he stroked the skin on the back of my knee.

His hard length pushed against my entrance, so close yet not close enough. He kneeled between my legs and produced a knife out of nowhere. Without warning, he sliced through the silky material of both my shorts and panties. I shuddered when the air hit my entrance. He slid a finger along my pussy, and I shuddered when he then lifted it under the moonlight. I watched, entranced, as he brought his glistening finger to his mouth.

My rasping breaths tumbled from my lips, and the throbbing between my legs intensified with every passing second. I was completely naked from the waist down while he was fully dressed, on his knees, his mouth inches from my pussy.

He lifted his eyes. “Have you thought about my proposition?” It was all I could think about, but I’d never admit it. Instead, I shook my head. “Maybe I can convince you,” he offered with a self-satisfied grin, but his eyes had become harder. *Dangerous.*

He didn’t wait for my response. Instead, he put his mouth on my clit and sucked. My toes curled, and I felt that same finger work its way into my pussy, stretching me.

I moaned, feeling the vibrations in my throat, and I brought my hand to my mouth, smothering whatever sound came out. The reaction earned me another finger and a long suck of my clit. I pushed my hand into his hair, gripping his strands as he laved me hungrily. My hips rocked against his face, desperate for release as my orgasm built in my belly.

He worked my clit like a champ while pumping his fingers into my pussy. I remembered how it felt to have his strong body pounding into me, and it was all I needed to push me over the edge. I bit into my palm as my walls convulsed around his fingers, my limbs shaking.

My fingers curled into his scalp, holding on to him like he was my life raft as the euphoria washed over me, more intense than ever before. I sagged into him, limp, while Dante’s mouth turned gentle but didn’t stop as

he lapped up the wetness at my entrance. His eyes were closed as if he were savoring me, and I couldn't look away from his expression.

I was trembling, a leaf with nowhere to fall. A leaf he'd vowed to safeguard, only to tear to shreds. My thundering heart slowly eased and his self-satisfied grin came into focus.

I wrenched my hand away from his hair and a myriad of insults rushed through my mind. I wished I could scream them all at him because I hated how my body reacted to him so quickly and easily when it *never* reacted to any other man.

I blamed him for it.

Dante stood up, towering over me, then leaned close until there was less than an inch between our lips. He waited, for what I wasn't sure.

All I knew was that I had gone too far. My chest quaked and my hand trembled with the realization of what I'd just let him do.

"We could be good together," he signed. "So fucking good."

His eyes held mine, something darker than the shadows slithering through them. Maybe he had his ghosts too, just like I had mine. Silence settled in the air, putting pressure on my lungs.

Trying to find my breath, I pushed at his sculpted chest.

"*I'm not interested. So thank you. I got my itch scratched. You can go now.*"

"*You just got back home*," I signed, scolding my sister.

Reina had spent days with Amon in his apartment a few streets over, and now she was already going back to him. It terrified me how completely under his spell she was. It couldn't end well.

The girls and I tried to convince her to stay home for a few days, but we were unsuccessful. She couldn't wait to run back to Amon. I feared for my little sister's mental state when Amon broke her heart. *When, not if.* The part of me that no longer believed in happily ever afters knew it was just a matter of time.

I sat on her bed, surrounded by pink. Even her attitude was pink, through and through. Perky, happy, hopelessly pink.

“Just be happy for me, Phoenix.”

I sighed. “*I am, but this place is so boring without you*.”

She shot me a disbelieving look. “With Raven in the house? And Isla? I doubt it.”

I rolled my eyes. “*They’re not you*.”

“I’m only a few streets over,” she stated calmly. “I’m going to be back. And once school starts, everything will be back to same old, same old.”

Somehow I didn’t believe her, but I let it go. “*Just be careful,*” I signed. “*And for the love of God, sleep at least five nights per week at home. The sex can’t possibly be that good.*”

Her cheeks turned pink, matching the pillow in my lap and just about everything else in the vicinity. I formed an L at my forehead, but all she did was laugh it off. “Don’t be jealous, Phoenix.”

“*Of what, exactly*?”

“My dashing sex god.” It’d be funny if only she didn’t have that dreamy look in her eyes.

I pretended to yawn. “*Sis, you need glasses*.” She flipped her middle finger and scratched her nose with it. Then both of us burst out laughing.

She hugged me, squeezing me tight, then pulled back to mouth her next words. “Thank you for being a good sister, but leave all the worrying to me.”

I glared at her. “*I’m the older sister. It’s my job to worry*.”

She grinned and hugged me again. “We’ll worry about each other.”

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TWENTY-ONE

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DANTE

"*What are you doing here*?" she signed, looking off-kilter. Her brows lifted to nearly touch her hairline. She couldn't have possibly forgotten about my question.

Could she? Fucking hell!

I had given her a month—a long fucking month—to come to me after I ate her out on the balcony. The only reason I even waited this long was because of my brother. His sudden breakup with Reina put a dent in my plans.

"Not happy to see me, Nix?" I leaned against my bike, letting my gaze travel the length of her. She wore shorts and a T-shirt that read "I can do it better" and it made me smile. I liked that she wasn't wearing dresses to school. It'd be difficult to kill off every man in her class.

"*No, I'm not*." She flicked a look at the bike, then back to me. "*Now get lost*."

She turned on her heel and stormed away from me.

"Not so fast, Nix." I pushed off the bike and closed the distance between us in three big strides. It was the only day that her class schedule didn't sync up with her sister's and friends'. Fuck if I'd wait another week before I could snatch her.

I grabbed her hand and started to guide her back to my bike. "I'm going to take you for a ride." She shot me a glare, obviously misinterpreting my words. I meant them innocently. "Someone's mind is in the gutter," I teased.

Her cheeks stained red and I loved the look on her. She was so close that I could see the tiny freckles dusting her nose and the different shades of

blue of her eyes. Close enough to breathe in her scent. *Spring rain.*

Everything about this woman fascinated me, every word and look engraving itself so deep beneath my skin that it would be impossible to remove her. Not unless I cut myself open and bled out.

Cesar sat on his own bike two parking spots over, having insisted he follow me in case Phoenix pulled another can of mace. A valid but unnecessary concern.

We came to a stop in front of my bike.

"Hop on," I ordered.

She flashed me an annoying look, shooting imaginary daggers at me. "*I don't like motorcycles*."

"Ever been on one?"

That seemed to piss her off even more. Frankly, it pissed me off too, picturing her riding a bike with another man.

"Get on the bike or you won't like what follows."

She hesitated, probably weighing her options. I saw exactly when she realized there were none—at least none that ended well for those around us. I could feel the animosity radiating off her, floating around us and attempting to veer me off track.

But before I could let that happen, I pulled out the extra helmet and set it on her head, fastening it under her chin. I put on my own helmet and straddled my bike. She cast one last glance at the school, probably hoping for a last-minute rescue.

Then she got on and grabbed on to my shoulders just as I revved the engine. Her body jolted against me when I started forward, then she wrapped her hands around my waist and clasped them tight.

Her breasts smashed against my back, her curvy body molding into my muscles, and I fucking loved it. Her thighs pressed against mine, shuddering. I kept a steady pace, but whenever she attempted to put space between us, I sped up, which had her grip tightening.

I could have driven the length of the entire continent like this. It'd be the best ride of my life.

Cesar was right behind me, and knowing him, he was loving the wind and the long way to our destination.

It was just outside the city, a field of dandelions that stretched for miles.

The second I parked the bike, she removed her helmet and hopped off, putting her hands on her hips.

“*What is this*?”

“A picnic,” I explained as Cesar started to lay out a large red blanket, basket, a bottle of wine, and her favorite croissants. Her complexion paled and her eyes darted around frantically. What was it with this girl? I tried to do romance and she was getting pissed off. “We’re having a date,” I added, just in case she missed the point.

“*I have homework to do tonight. I don’t have time for this shit*.”

Cesar stood behind me and muttered, “She has that murderous look on her face. Is it mace time?”

Smart-ass fucker.

She stared at Cesar. “*Take me back now*,” she signed and mouthed slowly so he could read her lips.

Tension entered his shoulders. “I would, miss, but he’d shoot me,” he replied clearly.

“*If you don’t, I’m going to shoot you*.”

Cesar actually cracked a smile. “I believe you could too. Do you have a gun on you?”

Her answer was a frustrated sigh and a shake of her head.

I grabbed her chin and turned her attention back to me. “Do not address Cesar when I’m here. You can talk to me about shooting me.”

My thumb brushed over the fluttering pulse on her jugular. Fuck, her skin was so soft. She shivered, going slightly up on her tiptoes, but then as if she remembered herself, she yanked out of my reach.

“Stop being irrational.”

“*Or what?*”

I groaned deep in my throat, tempted to eat her out for dinner. “Or I’m going to bend you over my lap and spank you.”

Her kissable lips parted the slightest bit, the way they did whenever I said something unusual. Or maybe I’d said something completely wrong.

Fuck, I hoped I translated it correctly into ASL. It wasn’t exactly what they taught in those classes. After my captivity, my rage and nightmares came frequently, rendering me immobile to speak or express myself.

Thankfully, my therapist suggested ASL. I gave it a shot, but never told anyone. The fucking thing didn’t help in easing my communication during rage, but it sure as fuck helped me with Phoenix.

Then, as if she got herself together, she drew her hands up to sign. “*I don’t want a date. I want to go home. To my sister, who your brother fucked*

over.”

I studied the stubborn jut of her chin. “Don’t you think we should focus on us and let those two fix their own problems?”

There was so much to learn about Phoenix, and I was more eager than ever. Snooping through her things only got me so far. I wanted to hear what she’d share with me.

Maybe she was unmasking the tiny part of me that was decent. Although there was this feeling that I’d fuck it up somehow.

Or maybe it was a guilty conscience speaking since I’d done absolutely nothing to assist Mother and Amon in retrieving the document she needed from Tomaso Romero. Except, she was more important to me. She was all I could focus on, the letter be damned.

“*There’s no us*.”

My hand splayed out on her lower back as I pushed against her. “There is and you know it.”

She flattened her palms on my chest, but she didn’t move them. “*Why did he break it off with Reina so abruptly?*”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. Ever since their breakup, he’d changed. He was angrier, darker, prone to rage even quicker than me. “He won’t talk about it. All I know is that he’s pissed off at the world.”

She watched me as if trying to decide whether to believe me or not. It was the truth, but my brother and her sister were the last thing I wanted to talk about.

“You and me, Nix,” I started, trying to steer the conversation back to us. “We could set off fireworks. Fuck, we *are* the fireworks.”

For a moment, she stared at me with a blank expression, and I worried I used the wrong fucking sign for fireworks. But then she rolled her eyes. “*Just because I only get orgasms when thinking about—*”

She cut herself off and her cheeks turned crimson. I thought back to all the times I watched her through the night as she made herself come and a sneaking suspicion niggled at me. Why would she have a folder for Orgasms if she seems to be orgasming just fine whenever I watched her from the shadows?

“Do you think about me when you touch yourself?” I asked, unable to contain my satisfaction. She clenched her jaw, clearly indicating she had no plans to answer me. “I could give you more,” I offered.

A shuddering breath escaped her as she shook her head, but her eyes betrayed her. They shimmered with dark desire. The same kind I felt. Maybe that was the reason the two of us fit together so well.

She didn't answer, but I sensed the walls around her slowly crumbling down. "We'll dance through life together. You're it for me, dandelion."

The lust left her ocean blues. She took a step back and glanced at the picnic before she returned her attention to me.

I saw the rejection in her eyes before she signed the first word. "*I don't want to have a picnic with you. I don't want to see you. I don't want to be around you. You and your family need to keep away from me and mine.*"

It wasn't how I envisioned this going. My heart twisted painfully as I stood and watched her walk away, my thoughts reeling. I bit down on my lip harshly, feeling unsettled, the buzzing underneath my skin like a constant current ready to spark off a violent rage.

Except, it refused to surface as long as I had her within my sight.

I couldn't explain this need to own her, keep her, and never let her leave me, even if it meant sacrificing a limb for it. Even if she hated me because of it.

She calmed the monster hiding beneath the surface and those circling in my mind. She was my calm in a chaotic world.

She turned on her heel and left me staring at her back. Fucking again! This was like déjà vu.

I ended up having a date with Cesar. He lacked in beauty and humor big-fucking-time.

Looking at his face, all I could do was drown one glass of wine after the other. I had no fucking idea how many bottles we went through, but some hours later, an Uber picked us up. I found myself in my brother's apartment, fumbling with my key to open the door.

Then, magically, the door swung open. "What the fuck, Dante?"

I straightened, coming eye to eye with my brother. "Hey, grumpy."

"Fuck, are you drunk?" His eyes flicked behind to where Cesar was leaning against the rail, trying not to tumble down the stairs. "Again?"

I waved my hand as Cesar said, "We're not drunk."

"Nix is hard to get," I muttered, breathing hard. Fuck, my chest hurt. "She's not even playing."

"Huh?"

“You think a broken heart could cause a heart attack?” I asked my brother, who stared at me like I had two heads. Really, *he* was the one with too many heads, and they were all currently dancing in my vision.

“What the fuck did you drink?”

“Wine,” Cesar answered. “It was expensive and disgusting.”

“It was,” I confirmed.

“So much that you got drunk off of it…?” Amon stated dryly, then moved aside. “Do you two think you can manage getting inside or do I need to carry you?”

Cesar uttered something and the two of us laughed, although I wasn’t sure that I knew what it was he’d said. Something about a grape and an elephant standing on it.

After we stumbled into Amon’s apartment, he handed us each a bottle of water. “Drink it all,” he ordered.

“So fucking bossy,” I muttered.

“What’s gotten into you?” he gritted.

“You,” I said, pointing at him with my index finger and trying to push him. He didn’t move an inch. “Why did you have to end it with Reina?” *And ruin my chances with Nix*, I didn’t say. His expression darkened, just as it did every time her name was brought up. “I could have helped her with orgasm troubles.”

He glanced at Cesar who’d already thrown himself on the couch. “Don’t ask. He’s been talking about weird shit for the past hour.”

I flopped down onto the couch next to Cesar, pulling out my phone and skimming through the internet until an article caught my eye. Sex toys. Lotions. My head spun, and I closed my eyes for a moment.

I hadn’t been drunk in years. Not since the abduction. I let my mind wander back to Nix, and an idea trickled through my sluggish thoughts.

“I’m going to order her toys,” I exclaimed victoriously.

Cesar opened one eye, watching me wearily. Amon eyed me suspiciously. I ignored them both as I searched for every sex toy and lotion available on the market and pressed *buy*, *buy*, *buy*.

I felt at peace as I got my shipping confirmation, each item addressed to Phoenix’s apartment.

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TWENTY-TWO

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PHOENIX

My eyes narrowed on the open package on our kitchen counter, its *contents* staring back at me. There was a cryptic note on top of it without a signature.

Enjoy your clitoral vibrators and toys. Your satisfaction is guaranteed. Don't hesitate to call for assistance. Please leave a review.

My eyes narrowed. It didn't appear like a usual customer service number.

"What the fuck is that?" Isla signed, staring wide-eyed at the box. I slammed the lid shut, glancing around like I'd been caught on camera.

"*Nothing*."

She stared at me. "Do you need so many?"

I blinked, feeling hot all of a sudden. "*They're not mine.*"

Her brows met her hairline. "Your name's on the slip."

I groaned. I had a suspicion I knew who'd sent it. The same creep who sent me croissants. The same stalker who ruined my every date. The creep who always inserted himself around me at the wrong time.

My eyes flicked to the phone number. Was it Dante's? It wasn't the number he'd given me before, but then they often changed. The underworld probably single-handedly kept burner phone companies in business.

"*It's a mistake*," I signed. "*I'm sending it back.*"

She choked out a laugh. “If you are, leave me one, but if I were you, I’d keep them. These are worth thousands.” She shoved my fingers out of the way as I was about to seal the box, opening it wide open and pulling them out. “Jesus, this is all really good quality.”

I covered my burning face, suddenly feeling like I had a temperature. Dante was a fucking nuisance that I didn’t need in my life, except I didn’t know how to make him stop. None of us needed the shit that came with the Leone family. Reina was living, breathing evidence of it. So was my past.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed of, Phoenix.”

I shook my head. “*I’m not embarrassed*.” Just murderous. Maybe slightly annoyed. And intrigued how in the hell Dante Leone would know that I had issues orgasming. It killed me that I had to think about him to find release. It felt like a betrayal every goddamned time.

The expression on Isla’s face told me she didn’t believe me. “If you say so.”

I shoved the box toward her. “You can have it all. And leave them a review, will you?”

Isla’s jaw hit the ground and I turned around, heading to Reina’s room so I could check on her. Seeing her hurting so badly was all the confirmation I needed.

Dante Leone was my past. He wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—be my future.

For the past two months, we’d been witnessing Reina’s grief. Each day, she’d withdrawn further into her shell. She barely ate, her complexion was sickly, and the distant look in her eyes was all too familiar.

She’d been all in with Amon, and he’d hurt her. I wanted to be there for her and help her, but I didn’t know how. It made me feel helpless. I was meant to protect her, and I’d failed.

Clutching my sister tightly to my chest, I combed my fingers through her curls. She’d lost weight, and it broke my heart to see her so hopeless. Tears burned in my eyes and I couldn’t breathe. We’d always been close, even when I was going through my own heartbreak. I never told her about Dante, but she sensed something—or some*one*—had changed me. When

Grandma crafted the elaborate story about my illness, she took it at face value, so I went along with it. I was too ashamed to tell my sixteen-year-old sister that I was blind and stupid, falling for a boy who knocked me up and left me the same night he learned I was pregnant. After he fucked me thoroughly.

Although, now I wondered if maybe I should have told her. It might have taught her to be more cautious.

I shifted a bit so I could sign. "*Are you hungry?*"

"No."

"*Do you need help with homework*?" I noticed she hadn't drawn any new designs lately which was unusual for her. Her room was spotless, but the usual signs of her hobbies were absent. It was as if she'd shoved them all away into a closet, along with herself, and locked the door.

"No, thanks."

I wished I could go back in time and keep her away from Amon Leone so I could spare her this pain. She was trying to keep a brave face and fooled others into thinking she was fine, but I knew better. Our friends knew better.

She'd never be the same.

Fear crushed my heart. I'd started to notice cuts on Reina's skin. They were surface-level cuts, but it wasn't healthy. She could slice herself too deep and get seriously hurt.

"*You're so strong. You know that, right?*" Reina was the most stubborn person I knew. When she put her mind to something, she stopped at nothing. Like graduating high school early so we could have the college experience together. Or convincing my teachers that I could play music despite my hearing disability. Or clearly stating on her college application she'd attend only if I was accepted too. She didn't think I knew how much she did for me, but I did. So if she got it into her head that Amon wasn't worth it, she'd move on and be better for it. Thankfully, she wasn't knocked up like I was.

"You're much stronger, Phoenix."

"*He didn't deserve you*."

Her lower lip trembled, but she remained silent. It tore at my heart. I wanted to hurt him, just the way I wanted to hurt Dante. I wished we had a better relationship with Papà, but he'd always been distant. If I thought he'd

step up, I'd tell him what happened with Amon and he'd punish him. In fact, I wouldn't be opposed to seeing both the Leone brothers punished.

Fury tore through me. I wanted to hurt them the way they hurt us. I wanted to make them suffer the way they made us suffer.

So, I started to devise a plan to exact the punishment they deserved. If not both of them, then at least one of them.

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TWENTY-THREE

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DANTE

Three months.

Phoenix had been avoiding me for three fucking months. Ever since Amon broke up with Reina. Of course, my brother's sins were also mine, so he'd inadvertently cock-blocked me from the only woman who made my cock work.

Motherfucking Amon and his breakup.

I leaned against the bar, watching men in tuxedos and women in ball gowns mingle, enjoying Amon's latest charade. Anyone who was anyone was present. It was already a hit, and it had barely gotten started.

I stifled another yawn as I watched servers move through the space with trays of gin and tonics, champagne, and wine-filled glasses. My father was on the opposite side of the terrace, and I intended to keep my distance. I didn't need that fucker breathing down my throat.

A black lacquered bar with gold accents spanned behind me and I turned around, spotting the bartender. I flagged him over and ordered another beer.

His brows scrunched. "Are you sure, sir? We have a—"

"Yeah, I'm sure," I cut him off. "Any light beer will do." If the man knew what stronger alcohol did to me, he'd never offer me any.

With a fresh beer in my hand, I returned my attention to the party. People laughed, drank, and lounged on the plush seating surrounding the dance floor.

I glanced up at the sky, my eyebrows scrunching when I saw it was a blood moon. Visions of a different blood moon ghosted past me, but they were distorted. Hazy.

Dark brown curls bounced as she ran, glancing over her shoulder with eyes resembling Nix's. She stared at me with a soft expression, always challenging. She was a true goddess of darkness.

I sped up, closing the distance between us. I was almost there…

And just like that, I was back on the terrace, surrounded by women in ball gowns and my drink's condensation beneath the pads of my fingers.

I stopped breathing for a moment, my mouth suddenly dry. I rarely had memories resurface, but around Phoenix, they seemed to keep coming.

Where were you? That was the question she asked me. Did I know her? Did I do something to her? That would explain her hate for me. But I asked Amon, and he claimed we hadn't run into the Romero girls since we visited their father in Malibu.

Maybe I'd run into her when I was visiting my cabin by Lake Tahoe or the vineyards I owned in California. *But if you ran into her, you'd have told Amon*.

Maybe it was a dream, though I could almost smell the pine needles on the ground. And the woods looked so similar to those of my property in Tahoe.

My lips twitched, imagining what it would be like to honeymoon with her there. She'd probably murder me and bury my body where nobody would find me.

I decided at that moment I'd take Nix there when she finally saw reason and caved. We'd probably never get out of bed. No complaints though. I was all for it, if only she'd stop fighting me—stop fighting us, because there was definitely *us*.

Where were you? Those words were nagging me. Three simple words and the look of desperation in her eyes haunted me. *I screamed until my throat bled. You weren't there.*

I clenched my teeth, snapping out of my head. I didn't know what was real and what wasn't with Nix, but her words knotted in my gut. Fuck, I was losing my marbles. This obsession with Nix was fucking with my mind, and it was already damaged to begin with.

A commotion pulled me out of my dreaming, and I spotted Reina.

"What the fuck," I muttered under my breath.

She was talking to my father and mother, and the former was staring at her like a wolf ready to tear into his next meal. No woman ever came away

from my father’s attention unscathed. Didn’t Reina know to keep the fuck away from monsters?

Just as I was about to storm over there and yank her away, she took a step away from them. Then another. Reina’s eyes were focused on Amon across the dance floor, where he was dancing with a model.

Fuck, what was her name?

It didn’t matter. What mattered was that if Amon fucked up even more, my chances with Nix would blaze into ash. I made my way through the crowd when she whirled on her heel, her pink dress flowing through the air as she bolted for the exit.

She bumped into Illias Konstantin, exchanged a word, and then she was on the move again.

“Dante, how are you?” Konstantin stopped me.

“Good.” My eyes were on the small blonde woman who was moving with surprising agility and speed.

“Don’t tell me you’re leaving?”

My eyes flicked to him. “Maybe. Excuse me.”

I brushed past him and started barreling through the crowd. “Reina.”

She didn’t turn. I didn’t think she heard me. I made it out of the venue, my eyes darting left and right until I spotted her. It was raining and her clothes were drenched, sticking to her slight frame. Fuck, why did it always rain when you had to go after someone? I followed after her just as she turned the corner and disappeared from my sight. She made it less than a block when I spotted her crossing the street.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted a truck charging down the narrow road. Reina seemed to be lost in her thoughts, furiously swiping at her face, not seeing as it approached her with alarming speed. I started running, but it was too late. The grind of metal on metal.

One minute she was standing, and the next her body was crushed between the truck and another smaller vehicle. It happened in slow motion, but at the same time too fast. I ran at an impossible speed, then lowered to the ground next to her limp body as I roared, “Call an ambulance!”

The doors of the vehicles opened and both drivers took off. Fuck, I should go after them, but I couldn’t leave Reina alone. Not in her state, her limbs splayed in unnatural directions.

I scooped her bloodied body into my arms and fear I hadn’t felt in a long time gripped my chest. If she died, so did any chance I had with her

sister. Yet, not even that seemed as crucial as keeping Reina alive.

“Don’t you fucking die.” I cradled her to my chest, applying pressure to her abdomen. There was so much blood, I didn’t know where it was coming from. For a second I was sure she was dead, terror rippling through me. “Reina, keep breathing or I’ll have to resort to drastic measures,” I rasped.

Her face, surrounded by crimson-stained curls, was deathly pale.

“Ambulance,” Amon bellowed, his own face a stark white in the light of the streetlamp overhead. “Someone call an ambulance.”

“It’s on the way,” someone answered.

I raised my head to find him falling to his knees on the other side of her limp body. “What happened?” He pulled her gently from my arms, his hands shaking. Amon’s hands never fucking shook. “Where in the *fuck* is Darius? He’s supposed to be watching her.”

I gritted my teeth. Amon had had Reina under surveillance ever since he found out some girls at college were bullying her. Personally, I would have taught them a lesson, but he thought putting Darius on the job was better.

“If you’d read the status reports from Kian, you’d know Darius is overseas on assignment. Kian asked if you wanted someone else to fill in. You didn’t fucking answer the email.”

He looked distraught. His breakup with Reina made no sense. He clearly still cared about her. “You fucked up, brother,” I stated. He should have never broken her heart. He wasn’t the impulsive one; I was.

“Tell. Me. What. Happened.” Amon was teetering on the edge, probably ready to lose his shit. “Or I swear to God—”

“Two cars ran straight into her,” I told him, keeping my eyes on Reina’s pale face and noting my bloodied fingers. “I can’t figure out where she’s bleeding the most. We need to apply pressure, but I don’t want to shift her.”

His hands roamed over her, searching for the wounds. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure if she was breathing, she was so deathly still. Then, as if he had the same thought, he took her wrist into his hand and pressed his fingers against the inside. He held his breath, each one causing tension in his shoulders to grow. Until he finally exhaled a lungful of air.

“What the fuck happened here?” Fucking hell. This was becoming an Omertà circus. We didn’t need Konstantin in on this as well. Yet there he was. His eyes flickered to Reina’s bloodied form and his expression darkened.

“Her pulse is fading.” Desperation laced Amon’s voice. “*She*’s fading.”

He was right. She was getting worse by the second. Where in the fuck was that ambulance?

“My car is right here,” Konstantin offered, motioning behind him. “I’ll take her to the hospital.” We got to our feet, rushing to his car. “Shouldn’t you go back to your party?” Konstantin questioned Amon. After all, he was the host.

Amon cradled her body to his chest as he slid into the back seat of the car. “Fuck the party. Just get me to the hospital.”

“I should take her,” I offered. Unless he was ready to fix whatever was broken between them. I was inclined to believe that Reina waking up to find Amon holding her hand would probably make matters worse.

“No.”

Fury burned through me. It wasn’t right to jerk the girl around like that. He’d only crush her again. “You did this,” I spat, disappointed. It was important we not reveal too much in front of Konstantin.

Amon ignored me, shooting Konstantin a glare. “Tell your driver I’ll pay all his traffic tickets. Just get us to the hospital.”

“I’m coming too,” I hissed, sliding beside him into the car.

I had to ensure Amon wouldn’t squander all my chances with the other Romero sister.

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TWENTY-FOUR

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PHOENIX

Things went from bad to worse. Heartbreak to near death.

The girls and I searched for Reina for days until we finally found her. In the hospital. Black and blue. Fragile and pale.

It was difficult not to let despair overwhelm me. I wanted to crawl into the bed beside her and hold her, keep her safe. Just like I did when we were children and she'd wake up from her nightmares, screaming for our mamma.

The nurse came in and checked on her a few times, as did the doctor. Her condition was critical but not deadly. She'd pull through, but she didn't look good. Her bruised, marred skin and fractured bones, and the fact she had yet to wake up, were a testament to the fact that there was indeed something to worry about. Her abdomen wound was deep and she needed stitches, although fortunately no internal organs were harmed.

But the fact remained that she was still not opening her eyes. If she sensed my presence, she hadn't indicated it.

"She'll pull through," Isla signed, her own eyes swollen.

"The doctor assured us she'll be fine," Athena added. "She just needs lots of rest."

"I want to know what the fuck happened." Raven's hands trembled as she signed. "She went to see Amon and then ended up in the hospital."

Isla glared. "Don't start with your speculations," she warned.

I couldn't comprehend it either. My eyes filled with tears, feeling like a failure. I should have gone with her, been there for her. Granted, she kept refusing, but I hadn't pushed hard enough. Selfishly, I wanted to avoid seeing Dante, which made no sense since the creep still stalked me.

Sometimes he'd even send his right-hand man, Cesar, to do the honors, and that man did *not* bother concealing his presence.

Until last week.

Neither one of them were anywhere to be seen. Maybe Dante was finally done with me. After all, he and his brother had almost cost me my sister.

Isla wrapped me in an embrace. "Let's go get some coffee."

I shook my head. I couldn't leave her, not until she opened her eyes and I was certain she'd pull through.

"*You three go. I just want to be alone with her for a bit.*" A heartbeat passed, but they remained glued to their spots. "*Bring me a cup of coffee, please*."

That got them going. The second they shuffled out of there, a desperate sob tore from my throat, shaking me to my core. Once the first one escaped me, another followed. I was shaking, my own ghosts and terror for my sister intertwined with my failure to protect her.

Deep down, I'd known all along that Amon would break her heart, and I'd let it happen. My heart broke right alongside hers.

I took her cold hand in mine and squeezed it gently.

"*I'm so sorry, Reina*." I moved my lips soundlessly. The lump in my throat grew with each breath I took. "*Please wake up. You'll get through this and he… I hope he rots in hell.*"

At that very moment, I meant it too. Dante Leone hurt me irrevocably. Amon Leone almost destroyed Reina. Grandma could be a real pain, but I was starting to wonder whether she was right when she claimed that the men of the underworld brought nothing but misery.

How could love bring so much despair? It was supposed to be the best feeling in the world, not like desperation clawing at your tender flesh with a knife. My chest squeezed tight, turning my breathing choppy.

I tried to hold back my sobs. Reina needed my strength right now, not my pain. Not my cries.

For the second time in my life, I felt completely powerless. For the second time in my life, I'd witnessed pain caused by a Leone.

And this time, I wouldn't just stand by and hope for a miracle. It didn't come when I wanted to keep my baby, and it wasn't coming now.

This time, I'd make the Leone family pay. I refused to lose my sister to anyone.

I still remembered that hollow ache of losing my child. It felt just as fresh, and I knew moving on from it would be impossible.

I woke up feeling empty.

Two weeks since I had the baby and I felt worse each day. My body was healing, but my pain festered. The guilt grew. My failure tasted bitter.

Promises were broken. Hearts were stolen. Lives were forever changed.

The ugliness of this world had reared its head, and it became hard to unsee it.

"It is what it is," my grandma said when I woke up bedridden from a severe postpartum hemorrhage. I lost too much blood too quickly, causing my blood pressure to drop and my body to go into shock. It'd almost cost me my life.

Yet, as I stared at the same white landscape as the day I'd given birth, I felt as if I had died. The little life I had created was ripped from me, and I never even had a chance to say goodbye.

It didn't matter how devastating it was to me. I couldn't turn back time and find my baby. I couldn't change the past, and I no longer had the will to live.

Grandma had therapists already lined up. They preached that grief passed through stages. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

I was still in the denial stage of my living misery. It weighed heavily on me, making it difficult to breathe, difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The therapist said I'd arrive at acceptance eventually.

The soft cry of babies that traveled through the private clinic didn't help my healing process. It was a gruesome reminder.

"Phoenix—"

My lungs squeezed and my body grew cold.

"Was it… a boy or a girl?" I watched my grandmother while she avoided looking at me. "I deserve to know that much."

"I don't know."

Pain and grief became my companions. It'd become part of me, always there but not. Kind of like the child I birthed. My baby would roam this world but never be part of my life.

"Can you give me some time alone?" I signed, unable to open my mouth.

"Reina's waiting for you." My nails dug into my palms.

"Just go."

She disappeared with a soft click, and I reached for the pager. The nurse must have put it on the stand after I was rushed away for my operation. I turned it over in my hand, the small device fitting perfectly in my palm.

Bitterness filled me.

How could my life change so quickly in merely nine months?

If only I hadn't given him a chance… If only I hadn't fallen in love… If only I hadn't told anyone and handled it myself.

My hand trembled so hard the little device rolled up and down, left and right in my palm.

I would never click it again. There was nothing he could save me from anymore.

I'd never need him—or anyone else—again.

Except, I needed my sister right now. I refused to lose her like I had lost my baby. Everyone always thought they knew what was best for Reina and me, yet all they did was leave us behind.

Like Mamma, who'd chosen suicide over us.

Like Papà, who'd let us down time and time again.

Like Grandma, who made decisions *for* us, not with us.

It was time I taught the world to stay the fuck away from us. Starting with Dante Leone.

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TWENTY-FIVE

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PHOENIX

I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

The same face stared back at me, yet somehow it wasn't mine. Reina was in England. The girls were at the symphony, which made tonight the perfect time to hit the club where it all restarted. The night Reina got roofied. The night our paths crossed again after two years of silence from him.

The club that belonged to Amon and Dante.

I'd seduce Dante, then ask him for a full tour of the nightclub so I could scope it out. I would destroy it the way he had sent that restaurant and every date I'd had since up in flames. The way his brother destroyed my sister. My sinister smile flashed in the mirror, showing the true Phoenix. The woman I knew I was.

I was ready for payback. I'd finally give them a taste of their own medicine. They'd regret ever hurting my sister and me.

Twenty minutes later, the cab stopped and I made my way to the bouncer.

I flashed him my most flirty smile, then pulled out a phone and typed up a message. "**I'm Dante and Amon's friend.**" *Fucking not.*

Hopefully they were here. Even if it was just Amon, I'd find a way to make him suffer. I wouldn't seduce him. Even the idea of seducing Amon had bile rising in my throat.

I had a swiss knife in my clutch. I could stab him. *Great plan,* my reason mocked. Dante was simply an easier and more logical target.

The bouncer stared at me, then checked a piece of paper. "Your name," he said slowly.

I typed it. “**Phoenix Romero**.”

He quickly stepped aside, and I tried to stifle my surprise.

I entered the club that belonged to Amon and Dante Leone, wearing my sluttiest outfit—a backless red dress that hugged my curves and barely reached mid-thigh. Across the hallway, I spotted Cesar shaking his head before he disappeared. Knowing Cesar, he was going to alert Dante of my presence. If the fucker didn’t have some kind of satellite surveillance on me already, watching my every move.

Either way, I knew he’d come looking for me.

I’d barely begun shaking my ass when two men surrounded me. One in front; the other behind. Why did they always presume women wanted to be sandwiched?

The one in front of me clutched my hip and the other my waist, making my body revolt at the touch. I was just about to elbow him for getting handsy when a large hand landed on the shoulder of the guy in front of me, wrenching him back powerfully. He stumbled backward, knocking a few people to the ground on his way.

The guy behind me scurried away, and I locked eyes with Dante. He wore a black three-piece suit that barely disguised his muscles and his raw sex appeal. His hair was darker than the midnight sky, reflecting the flashing strobe lights—red, yellow, green.

It was a warning, a reminder, for the misery his family caused mine.

I wanted him. Correction, my body wanted him, but I wouldn’t forgive him. He’d almost fooled me again. Thankfully, I was spared another heartbreak, but my sister hadn’t been so lucky.

So I’d get my point across the only way I knew how. Yet, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being prey. He watched me, something in the depths of his gaze reaching into my soul.

The guy who tried to get handsy with me rose to his feet, but Dante wasn’t done with him. He picked him up like a rag doll, clutching him without even sparing him a look.

The guy snarled and scratched at him, but Dante didn’t even flinch. He drove his fist into his face, sending him flying through the air. And what did my traitorous pussy do? It quivered. Fucking *quivered*.

A few people ran over to ensure he was okay, casting fearful looks in our direction. Dante didn’t even spare them a glance, his attention on me.

“What are you doing here?” he signed.

Ignoring his question, I asked my own, "*Why did you learn ASL?*"

An emotion so potent and raw simmered beneath the surface. But that was the thing about anger and revenge, it made you blind.

"To impress you," he finally signed, shrugging his shoulder. "I want to be able to communicate. To learn your wishes, your desires, your likes and dislikes." *Too late.*

He stepped forward, closing the distance between us, and I boldly pushed myself into his body, my breasts brushing against his chest. My heart hammered, my fingers trembled, every cell in my body affected by him.

Silence hung between us for two, three seconds.

"*I thought about your proposition. I want to have sex with you,*" I signed before I could chicken out. My cheeks burned and I hoped he couldn't see it under the dim lights of the club.

Surprise flickered in his eyes, but it was his next move that shocked me. He grabbed hold of my elbow and basically muscled his way off the dance floor, dragging me with him. He behaved like a starved animal. *Or an unleashed monster*, my mind warned.

My heels and his long strides didn't mesh, and he must have realized it because suddenly, he scooped me up and my arms wrapped around his neck.

Too close, my mind warned. *Too dangerous*.

Not close enough, my body screamed. *Need more of him.*

God, I had to get myself together before my plan backfired big-time. Or maybe that ship had sailed?

But it was impossible to stop the next thing to come. My wrath. His betrayal. Our lust. It was all a recipe for disaster.

He stormed down the hall and stopped in front of the room I recognized from the first night I was here. It was the office where Amon took Reina when she was roofied. Cesar, still wearing his black suit, guarded the room, and upon seeing us, he nodded at Dante, then opened the studded black leather door.

The bass vibrations of music faded, leaving only a thick silence. My heavy breaths. My thundering heart. And the throbbing between my thighs. Peeling my gaze away from him, I focused on the room's decor. An elegant leather sofa with a glass coffee table stood in the center of it.

Before I could spot anything else, Dante's hands were on my waist and my back was being slammed against the wall. Our gazes held as his hand slid down to my thighs, hand bunching in the material. Then he yanked the dress up in one go, leaving me in my panties and a strapless bra.

I gasped, goosebumps breaking out over my skin while fighting the instinct to cover myself. *See this through, Phoenix*.

"I don't like seeing someone else touch you." He spoke slowly so I could read his lips while his hands were busy touching me. "You're mine." The clenching of his jaw didn't escape me. "This cunt." He cupped my pussy. "This ass." He grabbed both my ass cheeks. "These tits."

He bent his head, his teeth biting my taut nipples through my bra. He unhooked my bra, throwing it carelessly onto the ground, and the second his hot mouth touched my skin, a moan bubbled in my throat.

He ripped my underwear off, letting the material flutter to the ground before his fingers dug into my skin and he pulled me against him. Our mouths clashed. The material of his suit against my throbbing core caused friction.

My lips trembled under his firm kiss. The onslaught of emotions and desire rushed over me. It had been years since he—any man—had touched me, and it felt so good. Too good.

My hands around his nape, I tugged him closer, gripping the strands of his hair and feeling his feral growl vibrate against my mouth.

In a swift movement, he freed his cock and pushed the crown against my clit. My head fell back against the wall while every inch of me was on fire. I might be doing this for revenge, but my body wanted him. The evidence of my arousal dripped between my thighs.

He pushed his cock against my entrance. Once. Twice. Then, without any warning, he thrust inside me, filling me to the hilt. My back arched off the wall and a powerful shudder ripped through me.

I hooked my legs around his sculpted waist, giving him a better angle, and he rammed into me with deep, hard strokes. He released one of my ass cheeks and grabbed my chin, forcing me to look at him.

"You're mine." God, the world titled on its axis as I bounced on his cock, every second of it feeling like the sweetest sin. "You feel it?" His hand came down to my breasts, kneading them, coddling them, tugging on my nipples. "Your pussy's milking my cock like a good girl."

I was unable to keep up with the rhythm as he thrust into me like a madman. He pulled out all the way to the tip only to slam back in, hitting my G-spot and making me cry out. His lips moved like he was grunting and talking, but I was no longer able to focus on them as he drove into me with renewed fervor.

Then he stilled, and I blinked in confusion as he slid his hand up past my breasts and wrapped it around my throat. My eyes met his, each one a deep pool of lust and something feral.

"Say it again."

I blinked in confusion, my tongue darting out to lick my lips. His hips moved with a shallow thrust. And another. *Oh my God! Yes, yes, yes.* I watched him as he resumed fucking me through hooded eyes, but then he stopped again and I let out a frustrated whimper.

"Say it again," he ordered.

"*What*?" I mouthed, my one hand still gripping the hair on his nape.

"My name. Say it." He thrust into me roughly and his name tore from my lips, the vibration in my throat unaccustomed to speaking. "That's my girl. Don't forget who fucks you."

Then he drove into me again and again, his name a chant on my lips. The more I called out, the faster and rougher he fucked, sending me into oblivion. And I loved it.

His hand around my neck squeezed, the oxygen supply dimming as he drove into me. He owned every inch of me, just as he did two years ago. The less air I breathed, the tighter I strangled his cock. His groans vibrated through me, his ruthless rhythm never easing.

I moaned, my lips chanting his name. My core clenched, and when he hit my secret spot again, I came so hard, black spots swam in my vision and I felt like I might pass out.

But I didn't.

Instead, I watched this man fuck me with unforgiving thrusts. Like he needed me. Like he owned me, and that was scary. I should have demanded he stop, but I couldn't. I tried to remember my purpose for being here, in this club, but all thoughts were chased away by the feel of him sliding between my legs.

I was like an addict when it came to him. I wanted to take more of him, give him everything. The veins on his neck pulsed and I leaned forward,

licking his skin and tasting him. He went on and on fucking me, awakening my pleasure once more.

Just when I thought he was about to come, he swapped positions. He maneuvered me so I was bent over the sofa, my ass in the air, as he continued to thrust into me. Lust spread through me, my hands holding on to the armrest for dear life and my legs spread as I was bared to him.

I lifted my eyes and caught our reflection in the large mirror opposite the couch. The disparity didn't escape me. I was naked and exposed, but he wasn't. My hair was tousled. My cheeks were flushed. My lips swollen and my breasts hung heavy and full. But it was the image of Dante behind me that stole my breath.

His face was carved with raw lust as he looked at *me*. He slammed into me hard, pushing the couch forward. His thrusts picked up into a punishing rhythm, my hips draped over the armrest. I buried my face in the cushions, my nipples scraping against the fabric as he fucked me viciously. But then his strong fingers wrapped around my strands, fisting my hair and tugging my head back until I was half upright. I turned my head to the side, meeting his lips.

His other hand closed around my throat. He fucked me ruthlessly, pounding into me as the couch squeaked across the floor. Every savage thrust pushed me higher, drawing out illicit and primal pleasure. His mouth on mine, we orgasmed together, his warm seed spurting inside me. He shuddered against my back while I trembled and then his arms wrapped around me, always so possessive.

I expected him to pull out of me, but he didn't. Instead, he cocooned me in his embrace while his lips skimmed my nape, each kiss sending another shudder through me.

And all the while a million thoughts rushed through my brain. The loudest one was mocking me. *You're still in love with him.*

So I pushed him away, trying to get my bearings. Dante pulled out of me and I went to move, he signed, "Don't."

I froze, then watched him as he reached for some tissues and cleaned my thighs, his touch achingly gentle. Discarding the tissues carelessly, he turned me over so we were facing each other.

He was still dressed. I was completely naked, aside from my heels. He was concealed, and I was exposed. Resilient and vulnerable.

Reaching for the discarded bra and dress, he helped me put it back on. I smoothed it down while Dante combed his thick, veiny fingers through my hair. When I ignored him, he lifted my chin with his thumb and index finger, eyes narrowed and jaw set.

“What’s the matter?”

I wanted to say so many things.

I hate you; I love you. You used me; you broke me. I still need you. And I hated myself for it. Why couldn’t I move on?

Something in the darkness of his eyes shimmered, maybe even softened. Maybe he had regrets. Maybe he’d stop pretending now. We could talk about what happened two years ago and—

I didn’t know what, but I needed to know.

“*Are you in the habit of ghosting people?*” I signed, my fingers trembling, but that simple question opened the dam and flooded all my senses. “*And why are you still dressed? Is that meant to be a power trip or something?*”

The expression on Dante’s face turned blank and downright terrifying.

“What the fuck did you say?” His voice was ice cold as he grabbed my neck with a raw power that chilled me to the bone, then slammed me against the wall.

My teeth clattered as the pleasure immediately turned into fear. My hands came up to his chest, my nails digging into his shirt, wanting to claw out his heart, tear it to pieces. Just as he had torn out mine.

“*Let go.*” My lips moved, although it was as if he hadn’t seen them. Or maybe he truly didn’t care. He was like a feral dog, crazed and wild, thirsty for chaos, pain, and punishment.

This was the second time in my life that I’d felt this defenseless. Dante’s eyes were emotionless, void of life, difficult to read. He studied me with apathy bordering that of a psychopath.

I was frozen. Stunned in disbelief at how fast he went from passionate to this. A cruel monster. This man in front of me was unrecognizable.

My vision was blurring from lack of oxygen and the impossibility of this moment. It almost felt like I was watching it happen, detached from my own body. Just like when I was in the hospital and kept begging for him.

Click. Click. Click.

I felt the final crack in my soul. Or maybe it was my heart. My body pulsed with pain that traveled all the way to my chest. I felt it in every fiber

of my being.

No more. Never fucking again.

I tried to swing my fist at him, but he caught my arm effortlessly, and I felt it go limp beneath his grip. I chanced a final glance at his face and knew this was how I'd die, choked to death by a man I once knew, the one who I'd given my fragile heart to. Because for the life of me, I couldn't find Dante behind the cold, bitter fury his eyes shone with.

A gleam of silver inside his jacket pocket caught my attention. Not pausing to think, I reached into his coat, and my hand wrapped around the metal handle of his gun. As black dots started to appear behind my eyelids, I pulled it out, flipped the safety switch—just the way I'd seen Papà do it—and blindly pulled the trigger.

The power and strength of the weapon was disarming, the sound so loud even I could hear it. The reverberations pierced my ears and pulsed through my body.

His eyes met mine, and they weren't emotionless anymore. A range of emotions danced through them. Shock. Horror. *Regret*.

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against mine. He shook his head very slowly, then dipped it down, his nose brushing against mine while I stood frozen.

I had no idea what had just happened. How he'd gone from wanting to kill me to… kissing me.

I shoved him away and his knees hit the floor. My gaze locked on his side, the crimson bleeding through his crisp white shirt and slowly expanding.

Oh my gosh, I shot someone. *I freaking shot Dante.*

"You shot me." I nodded, not quite as smug and happy about it as I should be. "Why did you do that?" I read his lips because he was gripping his wound, applying pressure to stanch the bleeding.

"*I warned you*." My hands trembled as I signed, my lips barely moving as I mouthed the words. "*I warned you I'd shoot you if you didn't stay away from us. I came to settle the score, and while it went differently from my plan, I can see plainly now that the Leone family is a danger to us all.*"

"A bullet won't stop me."

"*I'll do it again*." Maybe he wasn't reading my lips right, so I signed the words. "*I'll shoot you again*."

“Better end me, then.” He swayed slightly, the blood loss getting to him. “Aim for the heart this time. It’s yours anyhow.”

I swallowed. The man was insane. *“I’ll kill you.”*

“You kill me and I’ll come back as a ghost and attach myself to your soul.” God, he really *was* crazy. “I’ll crawl through the fires of hell to get to you.”

I dropped the gun and bolted out of there with tears streaming down my face and a desperate sob pushing at my lips.

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TWENTY-SIX

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DANTE

She shot me.

But that wasn't the worst part. It was the fact that I fucking blacked out. In front of her! Until now, she'd been calming my demons, not awakening them. The terror I felt when I came to my senses, seeing that fear in her eyes. It gutted me. That look would remain with me for the rest of my life.

"What have I done?" I rasped, my body rapidly failing. The question was useless anyway. I already knew the answer. I was broken. After all, Dr. Freud warned of the consequences of not dealing with my memories.

It took the girl with sad blue eyes to shoot me for the words to sink in. Although I shouldn't be surprised at how it ended. After all, she'd sprayed me with mace and fought me at every turn. And she did warn me.

But if having her was the last thing on this earth I'd experience, then fuck it, she was worth it. Her tight walls and the way they milked my cock. It was the best feeling I had ever lived through. She was the one for me. I was certain of it.

Kneeling on the floor, I watched her run out the door, the taste of her still fresh on my tongue, the scent of spring rain mixing with copper.

Had I misread her?

No, it couldn't be. She'd wanted me—however briefly. She'd moaned, writhed against me. She'd wanted me as much as I wanted her, and we were glorious together.

Fuck! Was it possible to get a hard-on while bleeding out?

"What the fuck happened?" I met Cesar's eyes when he appeared at the door, panting. "Should I go after her?"

I was feeling light-headed from blood loss. “No, let her go.”

At least for now. “You going to tell me what happened?” he demanded, and when I glared at him, he put his hands up in the air. “Okay, okay. I can see this is one of those *Don’t say anything to anyone or it will be my head* things, right?”

“Damn fucking right,” I gritted as I attempted to move. “Elevate me and apply pressure to the wound. The bullet hasn’t broken or fractured anything.” *I hoped*.

Cesar said nothing for just a moment too long. “This girl will kill you. You’ve got to let her go.”

I shut my eyes briefly, willing myself to breathe. I loved Phoenix, but I was smart enough to know Cesar was right. Not that I’d admit that to him. “She missed my heart. If she wanted me dead, she’d have put the bullet in my heart.”

“I should put you out of your misery and put a bullet in your heart,” Cesar muttered, looking way too fucking serious. Then he shook his head, hopefully dismissing the thought of shooting me. “I think you’ll live through this, boss. You still have energy to bark orders.” His voice was as thick as the blood that seemed to be draining all my energy. “Good to see you’re all right.”

“You won’t be if you don’t save my ass.”

“Of course,” he said, not worried at all. “Saving your crazy ass is my priority.”

God, I hoped he wasn’t joking.

“Find a hospital we can bribe to keep us under the radar.” And then I remembered one thing. “Make sure it’s not the one where Reina Romero was at.” That one had doctors that reported to Illias Konstantin.

Then unconsciousness pulled me under.

When I woke up next, my skin was cold and clammy, and it took a Herculean effort to even breathe. I went to shift and was almost sick as the world tilted. I gritted my teeth at the pain that shot through me.

“Finally awake.” The vision cleared and I found Cesar sitting next to my bed. “Took you long enough.”

“Where are we?” I managed to say.

“Private clinic.” I met his worried gaze but said nothing. “You didn’t want anyone to know… Right?”

I sighed. “That’s right,” I confirmed, stifling a wince as I moved slightly. “What did I miss?”

“Aside from being shot by a girl?” Cesar and his sarcasm. Maybe I could shoot him, if only he weren’t so loyal. “Nothing. Amon is still on a rampage. Going after anyone and everyone who could be involved with Reina’s hit-and-run.” I shook my head. If he liked the girl so much, why in the fuck did he break it off with her? Not only had he ruined his own chances, he fucked me over with Phoenix too.

“Have you been following her?” He shot me a dry look. “Well, have you?”

He leaned back into his chair as if he was getting comfortable. “I’m not your brand of creepy stalker.”

“Cesar, I swear to God, I’m gonna—”

He cut me off. “Yes, I kept an eye on her. Full disclosure, though? She caught me every time and threatened to shoot me too.” He took a deep breath, then released it with an exaggerated sigh. “So, I had to *shoot* her.”

I bolted upright, ignoring all the pain.

“You did what?” I bellowed. It didn’t matter that she’d shot me. If it was her or the entire human race dying out, I’d still choose her without a second thought. “Where’s my gun? I’m going to—”

“What the hell’s going on?” A nurse entered the room at that moment and I shot her a dark look.

“Get out,” I growled.

“But, sir—”

“Get out *now*.” She retreated from the room, and I turned to glare at Cesar who was grinning like an idiot. “You motherfucking—”

“Awesome man,” he tried to finish for me. “I didn’t shoot her.” He snickered, rolling his eyes. “A thank-you would be nice for continuing your unhealthy stalking habits while you were out.”

I took a small breath and ran a shaky hand across my sweaty forehead. “How is she? Is she losing sleep? She must be upset after acting so

impulsively.” Cesar’s gaze darted to the window, discomfort clear on his face. “What?”

He looked at me innocently. “What?”

“I asked first,” I snapped.

He shrugged. “I don’t follow your question,” he replied in Italian.

This motherfucking fucker.

“Would you like a bullet hole between your eyes?” He snickered. “Say something,” I gritted. “Tell me now, or when I find out, I’m going to cut out your tongue.” He rolled his eyes at my dramatics. “Don’t you roll your eyes at me. You know I’m capable.”

Jesus, maybe blood loss made me a bit eccentric.

“Duh, I’ve seen you go all *Saw* and shit on people. But you won’t be cutting out my tongue.” I didn’t like how sure he was of himself. “You need me to tell you what your attempted killer”—he raised his hands and made air quotes—“has been doing for the past week while you were getting your beauty sleep.”

“At least I’m not ugly,” I muttered, suddenly feeling tired. “Now tell me.” The moment the demand left my mouth, I decided on a different approach. “Take pity on a man who almost died.”

He scoffed. “Whatever. It’ll take a lot more than a bullet to kill you, Dante.”

“True that.”

He waved his hand. “Okay, but remember, I’m just the messenger.” I nodded, eager to hear the news. “She visited her sister and went to school. And the girl sleeps like she’s dead.” My brows furrowed. No guilty conscience. No sleepless nights.

I sought out Cesar’s face. There was something else he wasn’t telling me. “What else?”

The tone of my voice was cautious, guarded.

“She went on a date.” He cleared his throat as red misted my vision. “Okay, twist my arm, she had three. Max.”

He moved to help me up but I grabbed his arm. “With the same guy?”

“Yes.”

“Name.” He shrugged. “You don’t know or you won’t tell?”

“Both, I guess.”

“Get him,” I said, my voice uneven now. “Make sure you keep him alive for me.”

Cesar shot me a disapproving look. “They ate together. Not even at a restaurant. It was after school.”

“Don’t care.” I held his gaze. “He should have run the other way.”

“Dante—”

“It’s all good,” I told him, steepling my fingers and raising them to my chin. “She can go on as many dates as she likes. We’ll just buy more shovels and bury them all, one by one.”

“I gotta tell you, Dante. My back can’t handle that many bodies.”

I waved my hand, ignoring the pain. I had gotten used to pretending I didn’t feel it over my lifetime.

“She wants to play, so we’ll play.”

“Maybe she likes dating,” Cesar suggested helpfully—*fucking not*. If she wanted a date, she should have come to me.

You would think I’d see reason. Anyone else would. But hearing those words only made the wheels in my head turn, and I dove into the alluring possibility of spinning the web around her and seeing all the trouble I could cause.

“Dante, the girl clearly plans to kill you.”

I nearly laughed, remembering our conversation after we fucked. Goddammit. I was getting hard again thinking about it. Gimme a fucking break. Yes, her pussy was fucking glorious, but I needed my brain right now.

Back to the conversation… She said she knew me. Clearly she didn’t though, because I thrived on a challenge.

“Don’t do it,” Cesar warned, eyeing me warily. “I know that expression.”

His words did nothing but spur me on, making my plan all the more appealing. Phoenix claimed she knew me. If she really knew me like she said she did, she would know that I would stop at nothing.

Then a thought struck me and I grinned viciously. “She doesn’t really want me dead.”

“She shot you. Trust me, she wants you dead.” Cesar shook his head with disbelief. “You’re delusional.”

I couldn’t wipe the grin off my face. “No, she just intended to injure me.”

Cesar blinked. “She got pretty damn close to your heart.”

“Yeah, with her Cupid’s arrow, but not with the bullet.” I rubbed my hands together, not feeling much of anything but the thrill of the chase. “It’s just a longer kind of foreplay.”

He said something else, but I was no longer listening, scheming my own demise. And hers.

As long as we went down together.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

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DANTE

I was back in Trieste. Castle Miramare.

My bullet wound, courtesy of Phoenix, had healed nicely. I'd decided to commemorate it with a tattoo, but the flesh was still too sensitive. *Soon.* And I had just the design in mind for it.

Christmas was tomorrow, and it was clear that my brother had no intention of ending his spiraling. I wouldn't have come at all, but I knew Mother expected us, and I couldn't leave her alone on Christmas Day with *that* man.

The moment I entered the castle, I spotted my mother wearing her pink kimono.

She smiled, making her way over to me in short steps, and when she hugged me, her small frame barely reached my chest.

"I'm so happy you're home for Christmas." Her eyes darted behind me but all she found was Cesar. "Where's your brother?"

Fuck, I could handle everyone's distress but hers.

"I don't think he's coming."

"Why?"

Because he's hung up on the younger Romero girl the way I am on the older one.

Since that wasn't a good answer, I opted for the closest truth. "He's been busy."

"For Christmas?"

"The underworld never rests. No holidays for the wicked."

Something flickered in her dark eyes, but I knew asking wouldn't get me any answers. "Maybe we should go to him. Will you come along?"

“Sure, anything for you.”

She smiled, then shuffled down the hallway, probably to inform the cook and the servants we wouldn’t be having any Christmas festivities—at least not here.

“Get over here, boy.”

I gritted my teeth, fighting the urge to pull out my gun and just start shooting in the general direction of my father’s voice. Fuck, I hated the man.

There was no need to guess where he was. He was always in his office, unless he was with one of his whores or beating my mother.

The door was cracked open, and once inside, I shut it behind me. You never knew what kind of vile shit he’d come up with, and my mother didn’t need this today.

I approached my father where he sat in his chair like an evil, sick king, cowering behind the walls of his castle that was meant for dark fairy tales. All this home housed was nightmares. At least for the duration of his rule.

His eyes locked on me, regarding me as he took a sip of his drink. “I didn’t think you and Amon would show up today.”

“He didn’t,” I stated coldly.

“But you’re here,” he drawled.

“Obviously.” God, how he irked me. I hated his guts and wished I could smash his head against his desk. I’d smoke a cigarette, watching his brain leak out of his ears and spill all over the solid oak.

“What do you want?” he asked.

I stepped forward, stopping at his desk. I opted not to sit, preferring to tower over him.

“You. Dead.” My voice was low but no less deadly.

He just laughed and sipped his drink. Nothing would make me happier than wiping that smirk off his face.

“You’re still a little shit, just like your mother was.”

Was. He never talked about my mother. Fucking ever. He’d never even shared her name with me. I had to drag that out of Hana, the woman who raised me. *Francesca D’Agostino.*

It was all I knew about my birth mother. And that her family owned vast vineyards all throughout Italy, which I’d since taken over. I started working them when I was twelve and running them by the time I was sixteen. It was the one normal thing in my life.

“I’d imagine Francesca would have probably said the same about you.”

When I was a kid and he beat us, I feared him. That wasn’t the case anymore. I didn’t need him, his money, or his protection. I just wanted him gone.

And I didn’t mean out of town. I wanted him six feet under.

The clear blue sea and bright skies at his back stretched for miles beyond the windows. It was a picture-perfect moment, minus the man sitting in the chair. It would be so easy to reach over, snap his neck, and end him. It would make for a good life and a safe home. But the Omertà had strict rules about the patriarchy. Murdering my father would eliminate the Leones’ claim to the seat.

Our gazes stayed locked, tension filling the air while a small smile curled his lips.

“You think you can end me,” he snickered. “You won’t. You’re weak just like *her*.”

Her. Did he mean my birth mother or the one who raised me? It didn’t matter. At least I wasn’t like him. At least not that he acknowledged. Although, sometimes I wondered. The enjoyment I found in torture. The way I fucked Phoenix. *Shit.* I couldn’t compare myself to him or I’d lose all my marbles for real.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I said, already picturing his pain and hearing his screams. Oh, they’d be perfect. The louder, the better.

He narrowed his eyes on me and cocked his head, almost as if he were considering the scenario of me killing him. Except something was off. Instead of worry, amusement crinkled in his eyes.

“You were always the weaker one,” he retorted. “You should’ve been born with a pussy like your mother wanted. You weren’t good enough for her, and you’re certainly not good enough for me.” Anger knotted in my stomach. He never considered me good enough, and I’d stopped trying a long time ago. “It’s kind of ironic, actually,” he went on as a vile smirk spread across his face.

“What is?” I should have known better than to ask.

“Your mother killed herself.” I closed my eyes, my heart thumping. He lit a cigar, the puffs of smoke swirling in the air. “Right after giving birth. She took one look at you and sliced her own jugular vein.”

I bared my teeth. “You’re lying.”

“Oh, I wish,” he said, still smiling. He was enjoying every second of this. “It really was such a shame. I liked having my pretty way with my bride.”

I knew exactly what that meant. He liked to force himself on women, make them cry and scream, hearing their sobs carry through the air. He got high off it, the sadist.

“You raped her,” I rasped.

He laughed long and hard. “Call it what you will, boy. She was my wife. Her cunt belonged to me, and she owed me an heir.” I couldn’t breathe, my vision turning red while the drumming in my ears became deafening. “It took her forever to deliver though.”

I glared at him, the hate searing through my veins like poison.

Father destroyed and ruined anyone he touched.

“The docile and sweet Francesca quickly turned into a rabid animal when you were born,” he continued. “She tried to kill you when she realized you weren’t a girl. When she failed, she killed herself. She preferred to die than live to see my son. She called you evil reincarnate. Dumb bitch.”

No wonder he hated me. Apparently so had my mother.

The invisible walls were closing in and my hands curled into fists, turning my knuckles white. I started to get lost in my head.

My mother predicted I’d turn into my father. I could’ve had a different life, but she abandoned me. Hated him. Hated me.

My throat closed up while my ears buzzed.

“Francesca could predict the future, it turns out,” he said. “You are *worthless*. It was the reason I refused to pay ransom. Fucking the daughter of my enemy.”

I stared at him beneath a furrowed brow, wondering what in the fuck he was talking about. He stood up, the corner of his lip curling in disgust. There was a challenge in his stance, hate in his eyes.

“Couldn’t get it up for anyone but *her*.” Dark brown hair… The woman who sometimes came to me in my visions. Was that who he was talking about? “You didn’t think I knew, did you?” I kept my face an expressionless mask, my teeth grinding together. “I know everything, son.”

“You know nothing, old man. You prey on the weak.” My tone turned sinister, provocative. “Pick someone your own size and then talk to me.”

He snickered. “All brave and shit, but still fucking your family.” I had no fucking idea what he was saying. He was probably grasping at straws. “You disgust me. Not even I would go that far.”

This conversation felt like a ton of bricks on my shoulders and chest, making it impossible to breathe.

“Want to know your mother’s last words to me?” He went on torturing me and continued without waiting for an answer. “She would have stayed for a daughter. But you… She hated you at first sight. She predicted you’d destroy everything you touched.”

I shot forward, my hand wrapping around his neck. “You fucking bastard,” I snarled, clenching my jaw. My fist flew through the air and hit his chest. Then I did it again. “*You* destroy everything you touch, not me,” I growled.

A gasp came from behind me, but I could barely hear it. I struck him again, his mouth opening and closing without a sound. Blood coursed through my veins, rage feeding the violence.

Child of rape. Punch.

Mother hated you. Punch.

Devil reincarnate. I would kill him. Father’s body was sprawled over his desk. I could feel his ribs cracking under the force of the impact. I relished the feel of his bones under my knuckles.

I readied to punch him again when a small hand came to my back.

“Dante.” The voice was barely a whisper, my eyes locked on Father’s face. He needed bruises and a split lip. Just like he did to all those women. Then I’d choke him for a bit, letting him think he could fight me for an ounce of air. “Don’t do it,” Mother’s voice pleaded. I flexed my fingers in and out of a fist. I wanted to do it. His end was within my grasp. My anger urged me on. “Trust me, *musuko*.”

I stilled. She never called me *son* in Japanese. She reserved that for Amon.

Shoving him across the desk, he fell back into his chair.

“I’ll see you at Amon’s tomorrow. Happy fucking Christmas, Father.”

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TWENTY-EIGHT

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DANTE

The opportunity practically fell into my lap two weeks after New Year's Day.

My father was dead, may he rot in hell, and the only thing that pissed me the fuck off was that it wasn't me who ended him. I wanted to hear his screams, feel his pain and suffering.

My mind refused to remember my own suffering, but my body did. The evidence of it was all over my torso, a map of scars and burns. The aftermath of it was in my repulsion at being touched. Or maybe it was a self-defense mechanism knowing nobody would like to touch or see scars like that.

"You're head of the Omertà for the Leone family now," Amon remarked.

I nodded, unsure what to make of it. He didn't seem to mind, but Amon was good at disguising his true emotions.

We were both at our castello in Trieste and about to head out the door for a meeting including all the Omertà families. We lingered in Father's office that I'd already begun tearing apart, uncovering all his secrets.

I flicked a curious look at my brother. "Would you prefer that you were?"

"No."

I believed him.

He hadn't been the same since his breakup with Reina. I tried to understand it, but I couldn't. It was him who'd pushed her away, yet he was wallowing like *she* dumped him. His relationship with Mother went to hell

too, and I couldn’t help but be suspicious. Maybe she disapproved of Reina, although my brother wasn’t one to ever let anyone tell him what to do.

“Are you going to look into what happened to her?” I asked him, recalling how bruised up she looked when we saw her a few days ago. Naturally, I checked on Phoenix that night. She had no bruises or markings, but she slept in her sister’s room.

She’d been doing that frequently lately. It annoyed me. She should be in her bed so I could watch her for hours, wondering if she was dreaming of me. Or even better, she should use one of the toys I bought her. I had yet to see her use one, though knowing I was watching her might have something to do with that.

Cesar called it unhealthy. I disagreed. It helped me retain what sanity I had left. Otherwise, I’d be on a rampage just like my brother, and neither Paris nor the world needed two crazy Leone brothers on a killing spree.

You’d think I’d learn my lesson after she shot me. Hell no. Although, I still didn’t think she meant me real harm.

My conclusion: she liked me.

“I already did,” he answered. “I can’t get any intel on it. The girls went out on New Year’s Eve.”

“Do you think someone attacked her while celebrating New Year’s?”

He shook his head. “She didn’t go with them.”

I nodded. “She’d only just returned from England, so I’d say she wasn’t up for it.”

His eyes roamed the room wordlessly, studying the mess. I’d gone through Father’s records, books, even some disgusting photos he kept. He was a sick bastard.

“Are you redecorating?”

I flicked a glance toward him. “You like it?”

The corner of his lips twitched for the first time in months. “Anything is better than what Father had.”

I rubbed a hand down my face. “I never thought I’d say this, but this amnesia is somewhat convenient when it comes to certain things.”

It was as if my mind erased the things it couldn’t handle. I knew I hated Father’s guts, but I didn’t remember vivid details of his beatings like my brother did. Yes, the memories had somewhat come back, but they remained hazy. I remembered Father made Mother’s life hell, but again, not

in as great detail as Amon. Albeit, I remembered enough to know she suffered. We all did.

I didn't remember what happened during the weeks of my kidnapping or some months prior to it. I knew I spent time in California only because Amon told me. I knew I needed to secure a grape crop only because Amon told me. Yet, there were times I felt like there were things I was missing. Important things.

"It will come back," he said dryly. "Eventually."

My gut twisted. I wasn't sure if I wanted it to. Instinctively, I knew there were unpleasant things lurking in the shadows of my memory. Some nights I felt those forces torturing my mind. I fought them, convincing myself they weren't real.

Life was more tolerable when my mind rejected the ghosts. I gave my head a small shake. *Jesus H. Christ.* I sounded like a wimp. I tapped my pen on the desk, leaned back, and met my brother's gaze.

"Let those fucking memories come," I said, gritting my teeth. "I'd squash them too."

He smoothed his tie and got to his feet, buttoning his jacket. "You just tell me when you need me." I nodded. I loved my brother. Knowing he was here for me despite his own shit meant a lot, and I wished I could do something to repay the favor. "Ready, Leone-Omertà boss?"

I got to my feet and buttoned my own jacket. "I am. But I have a stop to make first."

Three hours later, Amon and I stood in front of the restaurant outside Rome where Marchetti usually held meetings. *Rosa Spinosa*, which translated to Thorned Rose, was owned by Enrico Marchetti.

"I can't believe you got a tattoo of a fucking dandelion," Amon remarked for the fifth time.

My skin still burned, tender from the buzzing of the needle. We had stopped at the tattoo parlor where I had my guy put ink over and around the scar caused by Nix's bullet wound. I couldn't think of a better tattoo than

that of a dandelion with the pappus carried by the wind to commemorate Nix and me graduating to the next level of our relationship.

An acute sense of guilt slithered through me, ignoring my willful amnesia at remembering that day. The look in her eyes when I came to my senses. My hold around her slim neck. My terror at seeing the fingerprints on her pale skin. *My fucking fingerprints.*

I'd been riddled with guilt and shame ever since then. I could no longer say that I'd never hurt a woman. It was what set me apart from my father—until now.

The words he uttered rang in my ears. *Devil reincarnate.* Maybe my birth mother was right. But I never wanted to hurt *Nix*. I'd take a thousand beatings and kidnappings to spare her from pain.

"Why are you frowning?" Amon's voice interrupted my self-hatred. "Don't tell me you regret the tattoo."

Shoving the thoughts of guilt out of my mind for now, I met my brother's eyes and grinned. "You like it, don't you?"

He shrugged. "I just think it's odd as fuck."

I chuckled. "You're one to talk. What's the deal with you and this yin and yang shit?"

"Don't be jealous because I'm cooler," Amon muttered, his hand reflexively moving to touch his own fresh tattoo, still under the plastic wrapping and bandage.

"I loved our bonding time," I told him sarcastically. "Something we can tell our children about one day."

"Hmmm."

We entered the restaurant, leaving the cold January night air behind us.

The Omertà vow was a commitment for life, and I was about to take my own. The organization had evolved over the last few decades. Our fathers believed in flesh trading; we didn't. Just like Marchetti's father, ours amassed a large fortune from the sex trafficking trade, something Amon and I, along with the rest of the Omertà, had steered clear of. Thankfully, so did the rest of the members. Except for Romero, whose connections we were using to eliminate cells that still operated under the radar in our territories.

Several soldiers patrolled the streets outside. They were mainly Marchetti's men. My father never brought his men to these meetings, and my brother and I wouldn't start now. I had left Cesar to watch over Phoenix since Amon and I usually always handled Omertà business together.

Three sets of eyes landed on us—Marchetti, Romero, and Giovanni Agosti.

“You’re late,” Romero gritted, looking pissed.

“We were busy,” I deadpanned.

“Doing what? Murdering half of Rome?” He didn’t like me. Oh well. My dandelion and I would just avoid her father once we were wed.

“Obviously not if you’re still alive, because you would sure as fuck be in the half I’d kill.”

“Okay, let’s all relax.” Amon. Always the peacekeeper. “Is everyone here?”

Marchetti nodded. “Except for Luca DiMauro. He sent Aiden Callahan in his place. And he brought his brothers.”

Ah yes, the twins. Tyran and Kyran. The wild Irish mobsters who, unlike their big brother, were reckless. Rumor had it that they tended to share more than just DNA, if you caught my drift.

It’d probably be a while before we saw Luca DiMauro, especially after his and Enrico’s fallout. It was for the best that he wasn’t here. We didn’t need war within the organization too, and both Luca and Enrico understood that.

“Okay, then let’s get started,” Amon announced. “I have to get to one of my casinos.”

Everyone in the underworld ran illegal businesses alongside their legal ones. It allowed us to launder money ourselves. And when we had too much of it to pass through, we used Luciano Vitale. Enrico Marchetti ran his fashion empire alongside his criminal one. Giovanni Agosti ran his uncle’s business in Italy and would inherit property in Sorrento and the Amalfi coast. Then there was Romero, who had Venice and the area around it. DiMauro had Sicilian territory, and I had Trieste and its surrounding area. Amon, due to his illegitimacy, couldn't inherit any territory but he’d always rule alongside me.

My gaze caught on Konstantin as we all placed our weapons in the basket by the door. There were no firearms beyond the entrance area. Although, I suspected we all kept some kind of weapon on us. I had my knife. Amon had a blade on him too.

Once we entered the main area, we got seated.

I almost expected a drum roll somewhere in the background.

“The latest issue we’re dealing with is Sofia Volkov,” Marchetti announced, kicking off discussions. “Rumor is that she has a list of illegitimate children of powerful men of the underworld in her possession. Some of whom are seated at this table today.”

“Someone’s been getting freaky outside of marriage?” Tyran deadpanned, his eyes traveling around the table.

I snickered while Aiden shot his younger brother a look that could kill.

“I’m pretty sure every married man that has sat at this table has had infidelity issues to speak of. We all know my father did.” I turned my attention to Romero. “You’re currently the only old man, although a widower, sitting here, so tell us, Romero, do you have any illegitimate children roaming this world?”

His face turned red, his hands curling into fists on top of the table. It was clear he’d love to punch me.

“Besides the illegitimate children,” Konstantin cut in, “Sofia Volkov claims to know the identity of every member of the Omertà. So instead of bickering, we need to find a way to eliminate the woman.”

Except Sofia Volkov had always been difficult to catch. She was as slippery as an eel.

“So what’s the plan? Do we even have one?”

“We have Amon’s connection to the Yakuza,” Konstantin deadpanned. His gaze shifted to Amon who was seated next to me. “Do we know if and when she’ll meet with your cousin?”

“No.” Amon wasn’t usually talkative. He had been even less so since his breakup with Reina.

After much back-and-forth, we finally wrapped up our meeting. And surprise, surprise, we didn’t accomplish anything apart from having me sworn in as head of family.

Romero stopped me on my way out, and I groaned inwardly.

“Dante, have you settled your father’s affairs?”

“We’re still going through it all.”

He nodded. “I need a word when you’re ready.”

I shared a fleeting glance with my brother before replying. “Okay, I’ll be in touch.”

In a million years, I couldn’t have even fathomed the subject.

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TWENTY-NINE

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DANTE

A clock ticked. Ice clinked in a glass. Windows fogged.

The temperatures in Trieste had plummeted over the last week, January being one of the most brutal months Italy had seen in the past decade.

It had been a week since Romero's phone call, and now he sat across the desk from me, occupying the chair in front of it while cigar smoke hung in the air. Father's untimely death had interrupted both their plans. It would seem the two of them had arranged a marriage a few years back between my woman and Amon. *My woman!* How fucking dare they promise her to anyone other than me?

Thankfully, something happened, and an amendment was made, changing the name in the agreement to be Reina.

Amon and Reina would be good. Phoenix and I would be even better.

A certain distaste emanated from Romero. The fucker didn't like me, and the feeling was mutual. It wasn't just one thing that made me dislike him, it was a combination of a lot of things—his weakness, his incompetence, his betrayal of the woman who raised me, the fact that he didn't shoot my father when we were kids. The list went on and on.

Yeah, my grudges held.

He could have ended my father when his girls shattered that ancient vase during that stupid party so long ago, but instead, he'd taken the high road. Fucker! He left us to suffer Angelo Leone's cruelty for another decade.

I leaned back with one elbow on the armrest, waiting for him to speak. Since the Omertà meeting, he'd reached out twice, and now I knew the

reason for his anxiousness. Well, there could be only two potential reasons.

First, the marriage agreement. Second, the possibility that his daughters had been the last humans to see my father alive. It made no fucking sense why he'd visit us or who would be taunting me with video clips of that night.

The silence stretched for a while after we both sat down, the tension building, and I fucking thrived on it. Let it fucking explode. Truthfully, I enjoyed the atmosphere. So, I waited and let him sweat.

"I want to ensure the arrangement stands."

Ah, there it was.

My gaze found Romero's through a haze of smoke. "Arrangement?"

He let out a sardonic breath, shaking his head. "Cut the shit, Dante. You know what I'm talking about and you know this will be beneficial for your family."

My jaw clenched, but I kept it together. I hated being called out on my shit almost as much as I hated being told what was best for me and my family. It would have been beneficial if this fucker hadn't screwed over my mother, but did you hear me telling him that? Fuck no.

"I don't think you have a say in what's good for my family, Romero. I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you need this more than the Leone family does."

After all, he was the one without a son. He was the one who needed protection for his daughters.

"So you're going to fuck me over?" Technically, my father fucked him over by changing the agreement, and he fucked up by agreeing. I needed to know why. Before I signed anything, I'd learn why.

"Your words, not mine," I deadpanned.

Romero puffed on his cigar one last time before putting it out, his expression contemplative. "Your father wanted to change the name from Phoenix to Reina. I agreed, and we swore to each other in blood. But when it came up, my lawyer wasn't available to formally alter the agreement due to the holidays."

"Why did he want to change it?"

He shrugged. "He said it was a better fit, and he didn't like Phoenix…" He trailed off as his gaze settled on me. The way he was stabbing his cigar into the ashtray told me he didn't want to say whatever was coming. "He didn't like her disability."

I stared at him with indifference while my chest twisted with aversion. If he'd told me—admitted—at this moment that he shot him because of that, I would have shaken his hand and signed off on the change. But he didn't. He discounted his own daughter.

Granted, it was the same daughter who'd shot me. Minor fucking detail. She'd love me… eventually.

"We put Phoenix back on the table—"

He cut me off before I could finish the statement. "I'm not putting Phoenix back into the agreement," he gritted, a glint of satisfaction in his eyes.

"Why not? You had her in there originally."

My mind whirled as I pondered the ways I could get what I wanted out of Romero. I wanted Phoenix. She was my vice. I thrived on challenges, but this was different.

"I'm starting to see that she's too vulnerable for the harshness of the underworld. The revised agreement has Reina, and she's staying in it. Or we won't have an agreement at all." I watched him closely. He meant the words too.

I could have helped out my brother and left the agreement as it was. Call me fucking selfish, crazy, a prick, it didn't matter. Despite everything, Reina loved Amon, and he wasn't getting shot by her. He'd woo Reina some way, somehow. I, on the other hand, needed all the ammunition I could get when it came to Nix. Since Romero refused to give her to me, I'd go at it in a roundabout way.

"We change Amon's name to mine," I deadpanned. "Reina and I will marry."

It was a hastily made plan. I was thinking of the long game only. Phoenix and I would take a pause, but I'd get her eventually. How did I know that? Because I knew my brother.

He would refuse to let me have Reina Romero. He might not want her for whatever reason, but he wouldn't let anyone else have her either—especially me.

And considering the hearts in Reina's eyes when it came to him, she'd either refuse to marry me or she'd run back into Amon's arms. Either way, broken arrangement, and *boom*… Phoenix would be mine. A substitute bride but the right one after all.

Besides, Reina was in those videos, and this would give me the opportunity to learn why. Two birds, one stone.

"Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"It's the only way I'll agree to it," I stated calmly, but before he could let out a relieved breath, I continued. "The document will be backdated to before my father's death, and I will falsify his signature."

I didn't want to hurt Amon when this shit came up.

Romero sat up straight, determination on his face. "And I want to give Reina another three years to enjoy her freedom." Goddammit. Three fucking years. The girl didn't need her freedom. She needed Amon, and I needed Nix.

Something violent spread through my organs like a case of internal frostbite. My irrational side began speaking for me. "Three years is a long goddamn time. I want Ph—" Fuck, wrong name. "I want to make it official *now*."

He shook his head, and I narrowed my eyes on him. He knew he couldn't afford to get on my bad side. Just as I was about to deny him again, he added, "It's non-negotiable. Reina is eighteen and still finishing school."

Fuck, I forgot she just turned eighteen.

We stared at each other, and the cold bit into my chest. If I pushed too hard, I would risk the plan falling apart. The question was whether I could wait three fucking years.

Fuck, I'd have to play into Romero's hand. If I rejected him, the old man might find some ungodly fucker with a twisted sense of ennui bred into him and a malignant stain on his soul. I couldn't allow that around either of the Romero sisters.

I got up, buttoning my jacket.

"Let's make this official," I replied before walking out. I signaled Cesar to go fetch the lawyer I kept on standby.

I wouldn't let this particular Romero girl get away from me.

It was just the fucking principle of it.

Three Years Later

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THIRTY

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DANTE

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26 YEARS OLD

I was waiting for Cesar in the boxing ring, but he was taking his sweet-ass time.

Since my father's passing three years ago, I'd made upgrades to the castle. This gym was my latest project. The goal was to erase any traces of my father, and by default it acted as a distraction while I waited out the terms of the agreement I never stopped thinking about.

The basement was my least favorite part of the castle and not because I was squeamish. It was because of the memories that plagued me when I was down here.

I attempted to keep them at bay, but they pushed through regardless.

Deafening silence hovered over me, interrupted only by a constant dripping sound. Drip. Drip. Drip.

Cold sweat covered my skin and I stared down at the marks slashed across my skin. I stood in the corner of the damp basement, fatigue settling deep in my bones. I just wanted to lie down and go to sleep. Find oblivion before my nightmares took over.

But I knew the moment I fell asleep, the rats would come.

"Father," I bellowed, my broken roar echoing through the basement. No, it wasn't a basement. It was a dungeon. My own personal torture chamber.

"It's okay." Amon's voice came from somewhere nearby, but I couldn't see him in the pitch darkness. It was a reminder that he suffered with me in our father's version of character-building. "I'm here. Just listen to my voice, brother."

I barely moved my feet, each step heavier than the last. I made it to the iron bars that separated us when I spotted him. Amon was hanging by a cord, his wrists bound above his head.

“What did he do to you?” I heard my voice crack as I fell to my knees.

Amon’s eyes locked on my chest. “I’m fine. How badly did he beat you?”

“I’ll live,” I croaked and tried to manage a smile, but that triggered the searing pain in my mouth. “He won’t though. One day I’ll give him back everything he’s given us.”

The hate in my chest twisted and grew for as long as I could remember, but it was never as great as it was at that moment with two twelve-year-old brothers staring at each other across the damp dungeon in the bowels of the castle they called home.

All because we saved two girls from his wrath.

“Are we just going to stand here and stare at each other or what?” Cesar’s snarky tone yanked me back into the present. I blinked, clearing the images that taunted. The memories were coming back with a vengeance. Clearer. More painful. “Hello? Earth to Dante,” he called out.

His arms hung at his side as if he wasn’t in the mood for this fight. Well, too fucking bad. The excess energy simmered through me, craving a release. It was either this or a killing spree.

I charged at him, but Cesar blocked it with both of his forearms and then landed a punch on my ribs. It wasn’t nearly as hard as I needed it to be though. It was my turn, punching him in his kidneys.

He gasped but it didn’t slow him down as he sent several punches my way. Eventually we found a solid rhythm. Cesar was a decent sparring partner, which was the reason I enjoyed it as much as I did.

I soon found my excess energy dissipating.

Eventually, we leaned against the ropes that surrounded the boxing ring, dripping sweat and gulping down water.

“Feel better now that you beat me up?”

I lowered the bottle and met Cesar’s eyes. “I’d hardly call that beating you up.”

He snorted. “Tell that to my ribs.”

My lips pulled into a grin, but before I could reply, my phone buzzed. I slid under the rope and off the platform to retrieve it.

Number: Unknown.

I gritted my teeth, preparing to find yet another cryptic message. The heads of the Omertà had been receiving them for years. I really wasn't in the mood.

But still, I slid the message open and my jaw dropped.

Motherfucking *fuck*.

Rage boiled as I watched the familiar golden curls. Father's body slumped against the ground. The next image switched to the body being toted into what looked like the catacombs. The cropped images made it hard to see the whole picture, but shadows to her left and right hinted she wasn't alone.

My breathing was ragged as everything started to fall into place. Had… Phoenix shot to kill? I replayed the scene of that night three years ago, the images of her reaching for my gun and shooting me. Was it her intention all along to kill me?

No, it couldn't be. She would have brought her own weapon if that were the case. Right?

A red haze blurred my vision. I had to close my eyes and take several calming breaths to disperse the energy. My mind bubbled with all the different possibilities, and they all left a foul taste in my mouth.

Phoenix had made it plenty clear she hated my guts. The sinister voice in my head pointed out that I should have fucking believed her. But I instantly shut it down as a muscle worked in my jaw.

The phone cracked in my hand, protesting at my grip, and the video was long gone.

It was time to enforce the marriage contract. I had to find out what the fuck those girls were up to.

There was no chance in hell I'd let this go until I got to the bottom of it.

I stood in front of the mansion in California where it seemed everything started all those years ago. It was old Hollywood, something the Romero sisters were known for. There were several cameras placed at regular intervals, blinking red. The fence was high to keep intruders out. Although it never kept Reina and Phoenix *in*.

Their grandmother protected them from the public, kept them enclosed in a perfect little bubble. But it was all a lie. There was no such thing as a perfect life. A perfect reality. Or a whole truth.

"Why are we here?" Cesar demanded. My annoyance level had been building despite my futile attempts at remaining calm. Cesar's questions weren't fucking helping.

I'd tried, and failed, to reach Amon. It was probably for the best. Reina was his weakness, and if the Romero family had an agenda, he'd be blind to it.

So would you, dumbass, my reason whispered, but I ignored it. It would make no sense to start listening to it now.

Incoherent memories and clips of images had started to plague me—more frequently than usual. I couldn't make any sense of it, no matter how hard I tried. But every distorted memory and dream kept bringing me back to California. There was a memory of one unexpected name.

Diana Bergman. Phoenix Romero's grandmother.

I'd been convinced chasing my memories wouldn't serve me well, but now they had started to haunt me. Whispers of ghosts and incoherent images.

I saw myself standing in the field full of dandelions with a shadow. A faceless woman whose lips tasted like sweet demise. She loved me; I could feel it in every fiber of me, and I yearned for *that* feeling. Goddammit!

"Okay, Dante. You're freaking me out." I found him watching me with a creased brow. "Why are we staring at this ugly-as-fuck mansion?"

"Thinking about buying something on this side of the pond," I muttered.

Cesar nodded slowly, appearing bemused. He was clearly not buying my story. "You have an agenda and real estate isn't it," he deadpanned.

There were always people with agendas. Including the members of the Omertà. I was no exception. Neither were Phoenix and Reina. I wanted war, and Reina wanted peace. I wanted to win, and she wanted to protect her sister. Wrapped up in my brother, this Romero sister would never see me coming.

But in order to win, I had to get to the bottom of their agenda.

"Does this have something to do with the woman who wants you dead?" he questioned in a suspicious tone. "Phoenix Romero?"

"Yes."

"Did she try to kill you again?"

Every day apart from her felt like a slow death, but if I told him that, he'd either die laughing or kill Phoenix. So I shook my head. No one but *me* was allowed to touch her.

"Then why are we here?" Cesar asked.

"Cut the power to the security system so we can get in," I answered instead. "Stop annoying me with questions."

He cleared his throat. "The girl… Phoenix… You're not letting her go. You never had the intention of letting her go, did you?"

"Are you handling security, or should I shoot you and handle it myself?"

He rolled his eyes and disappeared, sticking to the shadows as he made his way to the security panel.

Cesar was right; I didn't have any intentions of letting her go. The past three years were just a temporary delay. I'd only made it two months after our encounter until the pressure in my chest and my skull became too much. I had to see her, so I'd started following her again. Just to get a glimpse of her so I'd be able to function. The sight of her calmed me, which allowed me to focus on the Omertà business without blowing up the whole underworld.

Finally, Cesar walked back over, sizing me up like I was a ticking bomb about to go off. He wasn't wrong. A certain dark-haired woman occupied every brain cell in my skull, making blood rush faster in my ears.

"All clear?" I demanded.

"All clear."

We made it inside the property by jumping the fence, the same way Phoenix and her sister did years ago, sneaking out of the house. We stuck to the shadows and bushes until we made it to the front door.

Once there, Cesar picked the lock, and we were inside within a minute. It was as I remembered it. Extravagant. Flashy. Posh.

I made my way deeper into the house, my feet the only ones echoing against the marble floor. Stopping, I glanced over my shoulder. "Are you waiting for an invitation?"

"I want to know what we're doing here."

Stubborn ass. "I remembered something and I want to check Romero's mother-in-law's room."

He gave his head a subtle shake but followed me up the stairs. When we reached the top floor, I headed for the double mahogany doors, vaguely

remembering the floor plan. This had to be the master bedroom.

Pushing the doors open, I stepped inside the large space. It wasn't as bare as I thought it'd be, considering Diana had been married to Glasgow for a number of years. The large four-poster bed was made up, the scent of fresh linen still in the air. Fresh flowers in a vase. Half-opened jewelry box.

But what dominated the room was a massive painting of an orgy scene. Weird as fuck. Not even I was that freaky.

"I thought Diana Bergman lived in England."

"So did I. Maybe she visits frequently." I flicked him a look. "Check for any built-in wall safes."

We made our way around the bedroom. Checking every inch of wall, bookshelves, closet—

"Got it."

I rushed to him, reaching him just as he reached for the massive painting. Our faces against the orgy oil painting, we lowered it onto the floor and shook our heads.

"Why in the fuck would a grandma have that in her room?" Cesar questioned. "My grandma had a cross and a painting of the Virgin Mary in her bedroom."

"I guess this grandma is more progressive," I remarked dryly. "After all, she's been married like five times or so."

Without further ado, Cesar started working the safe. There was no one better than Cesar when it came to breaking into these things. It took him less than five minutes to crack it open.

"Looks like a bunch of cash and jewelry," he pointed out as I started to dig through it all. Stacks of hundred-dollar bills. Photos. Diamonds. Certificates… Fake passports.

"That's weird," I muttered. "Why would she have fake passports?"

"Maybe Romero got them for her in case of emergencies," he offered a logical explanation. "After all, the girls are under her care."

I went through each one of them and my brows furrowed. "They're all for her," I pointed out.

"That doesn't make any sense," he echoed my thoughts.

Discarding them, I was about to shut the safe when a stack of documents in the back caught my eye. I reached for it and started unfolding them. They looked like letters… No, emails between Diana Bergman and someone with a weird profile name. *Blast from the Past.* Bizarre. The

symbol right next to it was even more so. It was the same symbol I'd seen hanging around Dr. Freud's neck.

What the fuck was it with that symbol? I shook my head and was just about to get rid of it when a name caught my attention. Angelo Leone. *My father's name.*

I scanned over the words, every fiber of me on high alert. The last email was between my father and Diana Bergman. It was cryptic and made zero fucking sense.

To: Angelo Leone

You fuck with my family.

I fuck with yours.

D

It was dated a little over five years ago. I zeroed in on the date, which looked familiar.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Cesar spat. "That's right before your kidnapping."

A red haze blurred my vision as puzzle pieces shifted, forcing me to close my eyes briefly to disperse the energy. When I opened them, I met my right-hand man's gaze. "I think Diana Bergman was behind my kidnapping five years ago."

Cesar appeared stunned for a second. "That's impossible."

"Why? Because she's a woman? Romero could have been in on it too."

"True." Then a realization flickered in his gaze. "Do you think Phoenix shot you on her grandmother's orders?"

A foul taste exploded in my mouth at that possibility while my mind bubbled with different plausible explanations. The thought that these women could have been planning a long game didn't sit well with me.

"I don't know," I admitted. There were too many coincidences and that never boded well.

That family, Diana in particular, had underestimated me for the last time. I'd rip her apart, crush her bones, and watch blood ooze from her wounds. And then, I'd still take Phoenix.

Deep blue eyes flashed in my mind, full of disapproval. I hated and loved the hold she had over me. The silent sister. The deaf sister. The sister with luscious lips and a warm touch that had been haunting me ever since our first kiss.

I’d eliminate the problem—her grandmother, her father, whoever. Just not her.

“If you kill her grandmother, that woman might never forgive you,” Cesar pointed out, reading my intent.

There was no room for those types of sentiments here. I had hardened my heart and my soul. Romero and Diana, even Reina, committed a crime, and they had to have known that it’d come back to haunt them. They knew their time was limited on this earth. They hid their secrets for far too long. But not from me. *Never* from me.

If the Leone bloodline would be erased from this world, so would Romero’s.

It was time to make them suffer. It was time to make them pay. The only Romero that mattered to me was Phoenix.

She would be mine. At all costs.

This was my revenge.

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THIRTY-ONE

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DANTE

The dream always started the same.

I walked across the dark parking lot with my phone in my hand, smiling and happier than I'd ever been. My girl and I… we'd be driving into the sunset before long.

Except, I could never remember the girl.

Lost in thought, I hadn't noticed I was being tailed. Suddenly, an arm came around my neck and I dropped my phone.

"Leone owes us a debt," a voice whispered before pain hit my side, right underneath my ribs. A blade pierced my skin, I realized. "You'll do."

I grunted, feeling the warm liquid trickle down my torso. I thrashed, growling against the grip as the pain seared my skin.

"You're going to be fun to mess with," another voice said.

I seethed, fighting tooth and nail when two of the men in masks came around me. One drove his knee into my stomach, sending me doubling over and coughing. He stuffed something into my mouth. The sound of tires screeching reached my ears and I shot my gaze over my shoulder, meeting a set of dark eyes.

Everything turned black behind my eyelids as I sank quickly into unconsciousness.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I woke up in a dark space, the sound of water dripping in the distance. I had no idea how long I'd been in this state.

The ache in my body reminded me of the days when Amon and I were young and Father wanted to make us tough. He called it training; we knew it as torture. He'd beat us or pair us with one of his guards, knowing a

twelve-year-old had no chance against a thirty-year-old man with combat experience.

Fuck, if this was one of Father's ideas of teaching me a lesson, I would slice his throat ear to ear. Fuck the Omertà.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

My eyelids opened and I had to blink several times to adjust to the darkness. I went to shift but my arms and legs rattled the chains. It was only then that the cold metal against my wrists and ankles registered.

"What the fuck," I muttered as the bed springs protested beneath me.

A key turned in the metal lock, the sound piercing my skull. Silence followed, but it was soon broken by the sound of footsteps. I moved my eyes to the left, narrowly making out the outline of a dark shadow.

"Welcome to my empire, Mr. Leone." I detected an accent. Spanish?

"Who the fuck are you?"

That had him cackling like I'd just uttered the joke of the century. He laughed and laughed, then abruptly stopped. None of this felt funny.

He reached into his pocket. "If you pull out your dick, we're going to have a serious problem," I spat, jerking against the chains even though I knew it was fruitless.

Thankfully, it was a cigar. He casually lit it, his eyes roaming over my shackled form. Then before I took my next breath, I felt the tip of it against my ribs.

My heart raced. My breath wheezed.

It wasn't the end. It was only the beginning.

I bolted up in my bed, my entire body screaming in pain and drenched in sweat. *Fuck*. Expecting the nightmares to come didn't ease the effects of them. They made me feel weak, and I fucking *hated* weakness.

My phone buzzed and I slid the message open without checking who it was. The familiar video started playing, showing my bastard father entering the Romero sisters' apartment. Then Reina shooting him. Snippets of her with his body.

Then *poof*. The whole video vanished.

It was always the same.

My heart didn't even flinch. The bastard should have died decades ago. Now I just had to ensure my switcheroo plan would work.

Looking out the window of my bedroom, I watched the sun creep up over the horizon.

Sleep wouldn’t be finding me again for another twenty-four hours, but at least there was something to look forward to.

I’d be seeing Phoenix Romero tonight.

Give me a beating. Give me torture. Spare me a fashion show.

The room buzzed with guests, music, and fashion designs. Reina was in her element in this goddamn place and all I wanted to do was torch it to the ground. If her beautiful sister wasn't in the building, I might have.

My Nix.

I wanted—needed—to keep my distance from her. I’d conquer her eventually, just like I would slay these demons that plagued me. The pull to her was too strong to keep my cold dead heart from beating around her. It was impossible not to watch her.

As it was, I picked an empty corner, leaned against the wall, and slid my hands into the pockets, watching my little obsession make her way down the runway in one of her sister’s designs.

It was clear Nix was making her fashion debut as a favor to her sister, I could tell by the way she rushed to the piano straight from the catwalk. She was much more at ease behind the scenes. *Some things haven’t changed.*

My brother had been brooding and glaring at me all evening, yet refused to make a move. I might have to kick him in the fucking ass to get him going. I didn’t buy the ring in my pocket for Reina; I bought it for her sister. Three years ago.

I stopped harassing the brunette, but I never stopped stalking her. It was better for the world and my mental health when I did. So, technically, I was doing everyone a favor.

Aren’t I a true saint, I snickered to myself.

As the small orchestra began their set, Reina made her way down the catwalk with a young boy, but she didn’t maintain my interest. Instead, my eyes kept darting to the back corner where her sister played the piano with an expression of pure bliss on her face.

That was her happy place. Music. The tunes she couldn’t hear but crafted beautifully with her graceful fingers. The bullet wound she gave me

three years ago suddenly started to itch. She had marked me as hers. It was almost time I marked her as mine.

I couldn't fucking wait.

I flicked a glance over the room and found Amon talking to Aiden Callahan. Why in the fuck wasn't he talking to Reina? Fuck the Callahans and anyone else. Jesus Christ, he couldn't marry them, and I sure as fuck couldn't marry the blonde ray of sunshine that always strutted around in pink.

Maybe I should stir some trouble?

As if on cue, a flash of pink caught my attention and I spotted Reina.

I reached out and grabbed her wrist. "Not so fast," I drawled. From the corner of my eye, I spotted Amon making his way toward us with a stormy expression. "Your father wants to speak to us."

She tried to yank her wrist out of my grip, but I refused to let go.

"I'll see him later." She flashed me a venomous smile, then she scanned the crowd as if nothing was wrong.

Reina hated my guts. Almost as much as her sister.

"Now," I gritted.

"Dante." Wryness coated my brother's voice with warning. Reina's eyes darted to him, and for a moment it was as if the two of them forgot I was here. It wasn't long before her eyes flashed with cold disdain.

I grinned. Finally we were getting somewhere. "There you are, brother," I drawled. "You can join in too. We have big news to announce."

Amon didn't know about the marriage arrangement, and I hoped once he learned, he'd move faster. I didn't have another three years to wait.

Reina yanked her wrist out of my hold, and this time, I let her.

"It's really not a good time for me, Dante," she muttered, but before she could take a step, her father appeared.

"Ah, there you are, Reina." She let out a small sigh but kept her smile on. It was fake as shit, but Romero either chose not to see it or ignored it.

"Hello, Papà."

Romero's gaze flickered to my brother and then me. "Dante. Amon. I'm assuming you two have already spoken."

We hadn't. I'd been delaying it, taunting him, pushing him to lose his cool. If he snapped and snatched Reina, I'd just get the sister I wanted anyhow. Win-win.

"Let's step to the side, shall we?"

“I’ll see you later—” It was as if Amon were running away from Reina, but before he could leave, Romero stopped him.

“Stay.”

Romero nudged a hesitant Reina to the left, urging her forward until we weren’t in the middle of all the commotion. Music still played and chatter filled the air.

“What’s this about, Papà?” Frustration flickered across her expression while she kept her back to us. “This event is extremely important. My career hinges on making a good impression.”

“You aren’t too busy to hear this.”

Amon’s hands curled into fists at Romero’s tone, but he didn’t move. I let out a sardonic breath. I hated Romero’s guts too, but this was too entertaining not to enjoy. Hopefully Amon would beat him up, kidnap Reina, and we’d all get a happy ending.

“Okay, what’s this about?” Reina faced her father, her spine so straight it might actually snap.

“You and Dante are to be married.”

Shock. Surprise. Disgust. I watched it all flash over her expression. Ironically, Amon’s expression followed the same pattern, with one addition. Fury. His knuckles turned white, and I fully anticipated a punch.

“Papà, c-can we please talk about this?” Reina’s hands were shaking, and I felt the tiniest bit sorry for her, but not enough to jump in and help. She had some explaining to do after all. “Alone.”

The corner of my lips lifted and I decided to be an even bigger asshole and push my brother more. “As your future husband,” I drawled, “you can say anything in front of me.”

I swore I heard Amon’s teeth grind. It was music to my ears, because it meant he wasn’t indifferent to any of this. He’d do something about this whole arrangement.

“Papà, please. Grandma will never approve,” Reina begged.

“She has no say in the matter.”

I reached out to Reina as if to comfort her, but Amon grabbed my wrist, pinning me with a *Touch her and I will kill you* look. I almost laughed at his predictability.

I just grinned, while Reina glared at the two of us. “No.” Reina squared her shoulders. “I’m not doing it.”

“Reina—”

“Papà, I really need to talk to you,” she hissed under her breath. “Alone.”

As the two of them walked away, she glanced over her shoulder and flipped us off.

The two sisters were more alike than I thought.

“What are you playing at, Dante?” My brother’s voice was as cold as ice, slashing through the crowded room like a whip.

“I’m not playing.” *Much.* “Just trying to get some shit done.” *Marry Phoenix and get answers from Reina.*

It was a simple plan. All Amon had to do was snatch Reina for himself.

Leaning against the wall with our hands tucked in our pockets, we watched Reina make her way back, her expression resigned. *Fuck.* Were Amon and Reina really not going to fight this marriage?

Suddenly my tie felt too tight, like a noose around my neck.

“You came to your senses,” I deadpanned, choosing sarcasm even though my panic was mounting and sending a cold sweat over me. If those two didn’t make their choice, I’d have to push them into it.

A frustrated sound traveled up her throat, but Reina kept it locked in.

It was Romero who answered. “She did, Dante.” A spark flickered through Amon’s dark eyes, but he remained silent. “We’ll discuss the plans tomorrow.”

I didn’t give a shit about the plans. Instead, I studied Reina. It was time to push her buttons. “We should probably set aside some time to get to know each other better, Reina.”

“Sure.” Her expression promised retribution. Possibly murder. “I’ll give you my assistant’s number.”

Romero rubbed his hands together, satisfied. “Excellent, you two work it out. I’ll let Marchetti know, and we’ll set the date.”

I rolled my eyes as he weaved through the crowd. The girl didn’t have an assistant, but apparently Romero didn’t know that. Jesus, did the man know anything about his own daughters?

I didn’t get to dwell on it. Reina faced us, glaring at Amon and me. “Now, let’s drop the pretense. What the hell do you want, Dante?”

“You, obviously.” *Your sister.* My eyes flickered above her head to where Phoenix was, tempting me like Aphrodite. “We’ll be a big, happy family.”

Phoenix and me. Reina and Amon.

“The Leone family’s idea of what qualifies as ‘happy’ is vastly different to ours,” she hissed, her eyes narrowed on me.

“We can meet in the middle,” I drawled, ignoring her passive-aggressive jab.

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll even fall in love.” *Fuck, Amon. Do something. Punch me, throw her over your shoulder, and get going.* Yet, he didn’t move. He stood like a statue, anger rolling off him in waves that could level a major city.

“Falling in love is overrated. Not that I’m talking from experience or anything.” Lovely, two stubborn idiots. At this rate, we’d never get anywhere. *Except the altar.*

The invisible noose around my neck tightened and I reached for my tie, tugging on it subtly.

Reina turned to leave but then changed her mind. The slap came while I worried about the shackles.

“Call my sister ‘lacking’ again and it will be the last word you ever speak. *Capisce*?” Goddammit. I knew Tomaso Romero had a big mouth.

Reina smirked, then strutted away, probably proud of herself for pulling off a word in Italian.

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THIRTY-TWO

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PHOENIX

I felt him watching me from the shadows.

An eerie sensation trickled into my bones and I pulled my wool coat tighter around my body. December wasn't very pleasant in Paris, its temperatures hit or miss. Or maybe it was just the mood I was in.

My sister was in an arranged marriage with the boy I fell in love with five years ago. The boy who broke my heart and left me alone when I needed him the most. It was a bitter pill to swallow. First, he had forgotten me, and now, he was marrying my sister.

But he was still stalking *me*.

After I shot him, I thought Dante would get the message. I meant business that night in his club, and I'd kill him if he tried anything again. Yet, the persistent creep kept following me in the dark, shadowing me wherever I went. Sometimes even Cesar did the honors.

As usual, I pretended I didn't see him and that neither one of them existed. But my whole body was so attuned to Dante that it was like every fiber of my being got used to the weight of his stare.

But thankfully, Dante stopped approaching me. So maybe he did learn his lesson. Granted, I stopped dating after I didn't hear back from Baptiste and a few other men I went out on dates with turned up beaten.

Not that I mourned my dating life.

I spotted his motorbike from the corner of my eye. By now, I recognized every one of his vehicles. Even his helmets, and he had many. He passed me on his BMW motorbike, the pavement vibrating from the throttle of it.

Show-off! Hope he breaks his neck.

I shook my head at his stupidity. I wouldn’t even pause to help him. I’d step over his body for being a total idiot.

Pretending he didn’t exist, I turned to Rue de Richelieu. My destination was my only focus.

Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

I had some research to conduct, and I couldn’t afford for anyone to trace it. I would tell Reina about my baby after we took off and left everything behind. We came to the conclusion running was the only solution. Let Papà, Grandma, and the Leone lunatic figure out their stupid arrangement.

Tomorrow was Reina’s rehearsal dinner. We’d decided to stay for that, give everyone the impression that she was going along with this stupid arrangement, and then we’d disappear.

The magnificent building occupied a full city block, surrounded by four major streets in Paris—Rue de Richelieu, Rue des Petits-Champs, Rue Vivienne, and Rue Colbert. At the entrance of the library, I couldn’t resist glancing over my shoulder. His visor was lifted and he was parked across the street, his savage gaze on me.

Goosebumps erupted on my skin and I rushed into the building, not even stopping to collect my change after paying the entrance fee. He never followed me into buildings, and I prayed he wouldn’t start today.

I had to use the public computer to dig up whatever information I could find on adoption laws and my rights, and I didn’t need anyone standing in my way.

Three hours later, I was back in our little haven, the apartment I’d called home for the last five years.

After taking a shower and changing into pajamas, I went to Reina’s room and knocked on the door. I couldn’t hear her answer, of course, so I cautiously opened the door and found her lying on the bed on her stomach, legs in the air, staring at the dress that had been delivered earlier today.

Her black wedding dress.

“*Why did you bother getting it if we’re going to run before the wedding*?” I loved my sister with all my heart, but the idea of watching her

say “I do” to Dante sent something ugly slithering through my veins. I didn’t like it.

She shrugged, then shifted to a seating position so she could sign. “Just in case we get caught and I’m dragged down the aisle. A girl has to be prepared.”

Reina walking down the aisle in black would certainly make a statement. Unlike me, she was the spitting image of Mamma. They shared the same blonde curls, petite features, and an elegant aura that drew people in. She had always been soft-spoken until someone pissed her off. Then she was a force to be reckoned with.

To be honest, it was a trait we both shared.

She narrowed her eyes, observing me. “Are you okay?” I nodded, taking a seat next to her. “If you don’t want to run, it’s okay. I won’t be mad at you.”

The fact that I couldn’t spare her all the shit with Amon and now his brother had been chipping away at a part of me. She always did everything to stand by me and protect me, and I felt like a failure for not protecting her.

“*I’m ready*,” I signed with confidence. “*If you want to go tonight, I’m all for it*.”

There was just the matter of my shadow who was always watching. It was the biggest problem in our plan. Except, I couldn’t admit to anyone that Dante had been stalking me for the better part of the last three years without raising even more questions.

She nodded. “Best we do it tomorrow. After the rehearsal dinner. One last attempt to make him break it off.”

Reina wrapped her hands around me in an embrace and rested her head on my shoulder. I knew she had her own demons to fight, just like I had mine. There was no good ending to our story, but maybe once we disappeared—and found my child—we could have a contented life together.

She lifted her head, her eyes meeting mine, and the sadness in them gutted me. “I just don’t understand,” she mouthed, and I wished so much I could hear her voice. “Any of it. Why would he want to do this knowing—” *Knowing she loved his brother.* “It started like a fairy tale and ended like a Greek tragedy.”

It seemed to be the trend in our family. Mamma’s end. My heartbreak. Reina’s. Maybe the women in our family were unlucky in love. Well,

except for Grandma. She didn't seem to have any problems in that department.

Reina let out a heavy sigh and rested her head back on my shoulder.

The two of us on the bed, with her arms around me, my memories took me back to my own fairy-tale beginning. However temporary it had been.

"Four more months and we're outta here." Isla beamed, checking herself out in the mirror, wearing Stuart Weitzman stilettos and a shimmering, backless black dress that reached to her knees. I opted for blue Jimmy Choo heels and a backless blue dress that accented my eyes.

Reina shot us both an annoyed look, still frustrated at the fact she couldn't come along with us. With her braces and her angelic expression, she wouldn't pass for an eighteen-year-old, never mind twenty-one like our fake IDs claimed.

"I wish I could go," Reina pouted, sitting on the bed with her legs crisscrossed, wearing leggings and a pink off-shoulder sweater. That girl would turn the world pink if she could. "I heard the new club is amazing. They really should make an exception on New Year's Eve. Underaged kids should be able to celebrate too."

"Yes, in bed," Isla, ever the motherly type, scolded her. "And you have a cold."

Reina eyed her dryly. "You two will catch colds wearing those skimpy outfits in the middle of winter."

Isla just shrugged. "Small price for beauty. Besides, I'm half Russian. I can handle the cold," she assured as goose bumps rose on her skin.

I snorted. The three of us grew up in California. Our idea of winter was watching Hallmark movies from the warmth of the inside. The cold was the only thing we all minded about this boarding school.

"As soon as your braces are off, we'll be hitting every club in the state of California," I signed in an effort to comfort her.

"Promise?"

"Absolutely."

My little sister smiled, then winked. "Good, I'll hold you to it. Both of you. And while you're out, I'm gonna pay a visit to the asshole who thought he could grope my big sister's ass." She reached under the pillow and pulled out the fireworks she snuck into the dorms. "Jason the firecracker."

Isla's eyes shone with amusement. "Record it."

“Just don’t get us in trouble,” I warned her, signing. “Remember, Grandma said staying in the boarding school was a test before our college years kick off.”

Reina rolled her eyes. “We’re related to criminals. Of course I won’t get caught. Leave it to me.”

I shook my head but couldn’t keep the smile off my face.

With one last look at our reflections in the full-length mirror, Isla and I blew a kiss to Reina and left our dorm, making our way to Isla’s Mini Cooper in the parking lot.

An hour later, we pulled up to the club at the Tahoe City Marina. It took us a few tries around the block to find a parking spot.

“Would you look at that?” Isla grinned happily. “Stars must be aligning because we got a spot right out front.”

Once parked, we made our way toward the entrance, strutting like we belonged. Neither one of us bothered to look at the line snaking from the front of the club all the way around the corner. We’d done this plenty of times, we knew how to play it. It was a new club, but the rules remained the same. Look hot enough and the bouncer will let you in.

Like clockwork, the bouncer’s eyes scanned over us before he unclipped the crimson rope with a nod.

The moment we passed the doors to the entrance, we were stopped and searched. This was a first for us both.

It wasn’t until we were deep inside the club that Isla and I shared an excited glance. “I love how it works every time,” she signed and mouthed.

“Like a charm,” I signed back. “He didn’t even ask for our IDs. Why do you think they searched us?”

Isla shrugged her slim shoulders. “Maybe some criminal owns it and doesn’t want someone to shoot him in his own club?”

I rolled my eyes, then got sidetracked the moment we were on the first floor where men and women alike were getting drunk and rubbing all over each other.

The music was so loud it sent vibrations through my body and made my insides tremble with excitement. I loved how it allowed me to feel normal for a little bit.

The two of us made our way to the bar and ordered two shots of Fireball. When the bartender slid the little glasses to us, we clinked them in a toast.

“Happy New Year to us,” I signed, then we downed our shots, promptly coughing.

Isla wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then tapped her chest. “Shit, that burns.”

Just as I put the glass back on the counter, the hairs on the back of my neck prickled and I got the feeling that someone was staring at me. Slowly turning my head, I let my eyes travel the room but couldn’t spot anyone.

Shaking off the feeling of being watched, Isla and I made our way to the dance floor. For the next hour, we danced and laughed, drank some more, and danced again. The music drummed in my veins, sending vibrations up from my toes.

Isla found some schmuck and was making out with him in the far corner while I kept an eye on her. It was our rule: never disappear from view.

I kept dancing with a heady, uninhibited rush in my blood, the dimmed lights casting a glow against my bare legs and arms. The bodies on the dance floor moved as one, but I was in my own world.

A drop of sweat ran down my back and I pulled the heavy strands of my hair into my fist when I felt someone’s hands on me. I whirled around and found a young man with dark eyes and blond hair grinning like a fool.

I read his lips. “Hi, beautiful.”

I groaned. It was always the same with boys. They thought if they smiled at you and called you beautiful, you’d fall at their feet. If my heart tripped over itself, or at least paused for a flicker of a second at the sight of him, I’d give him a try.

Zip. Nada.

I danced my way away from him, but he followed. I groaned inwardly, annoyed at the interruption. My eyes roamed over the crowd, looking for a suitable victim that would intimidate this fucker. My breath caught when my eyes collided with a set of blue ones.

Dante Leone.

All grown up and wearing a black three-piece suit, the outline of his weapon visible underneath his jacket. Looked to me like he didn’t get searched on his way in.

I recognized him instantly. The boy I met when I was eight. All my senses faded at the overpowering intensity his presence delivered to my abdomen. It was new. Different. Unlike anything I had ever experienced

before. I didn't remember feeling this way when I ran into him at Grandma's Malibu house two years ago.

Someone grabbed my hand and my eyes lowered in a daze to find the blond guy latched on to me. I yanked my hand away and made my way toward Dante, my feet moving of their own accord.

Three steps. Two steps. One step.

And he was right in front of me. I didn't evaluate my next steps. If I did, I'd chicken out. Instead, I grabbed his suit jacket and pulled him to me. He even assisted me by bending his tall frame. With my chest against his and my fingers fisting his jacket, I crushed my lips to his.

The world faded as his cologne's woodsy scent enveloped me. My blood rushed in my ears as our mouths molded together. Everything inside of me stilled and raged at the same moment.

I pulled lightly on his lips, heat pulsing and spreading through me like fire. He kissed me back, parting my lips with his and slipping his tongue inside. Pure, unadulterated want shot through me, and I suddenly understood why love and lust had the ability to start and end wars.

He grabbed the back of my neck, angling me so he could kiss me deeper. His other hand gripped my waist, pulling me flush to his hard body.

When I finally stepped back, I was panting, my cheeks burning as I met a possessive heat sizzling in the blue flames of his gaze.

My pulse thrummed between my legs and something invisible and hot weaved between us.

"You're mine now, Phoenix Romero."

He remembered me, was my first thought. My second was that he must have felt it too, but before I could comment, his lips were back on mine, tasting me, sucking on my tongue and nipping my bottom lip.

Then someone bumped into me, and in the blink of an eye, Dante shoved him away, sending the man falling on his ass. It took a second to realize it was the blond guy who'd run me straight into Dante's arms.

Dante slid his big hand into mine and led me toward the back of the club. I followed without question, forgetting all about our rule.

With my hand in his, we went down a hallway, seemingly to circle around the main dance floor. Adrenaline rushed through me, the vibrations beneath my feet less intense here. I squeezed Dante's hand and he returned the gesture.

We passed a man standing by the brown leather-bound door with a VIP Only *sign, then entered the room. It was a private box that hovered directly above the circular dance floor with a window taking up one side of the wall. I suspected it was one-way glass. On the opposite side, there was an unoccupied private bar.*

He said something to the guard before shutting the door, never releasing my hand, and I wondered what he was planning.

He noticed me watching him and approached me. "Are you scared?"

Strangely enough, I wasn't. I reached for my phone and typed my answer. ***I'm not scared, but I don't like leaving my friend alone.***

He read the message, then nodded. His hand touched the small of my back before he faced me so I could read his lips. And what gorgeous lips they were. I wanted to kiss him again and get lost in all the sensations he drew out of me.

"I told my guy to keep an eye on her," he said slowly, his eyes locked on my lips.

"Thanks," I signed and voiced the simple word at the same time, then froze. I rarely ever voiced words, and never around strangers. Embarrassment washed over me, but his next words wiped them clean.

"Your voice… It's beautiful." His hand tightened its hold on my back, his fingers pressing in. "One day, you'll scream my name with it."

I held his gaze, my heart racing in my chest. "Really?"

He stared back, smiling that charming, bad-boy smile. "Yes, Nix, really." He pressed himself against me and his arms came around me as he dipped his head, bringing his face inches from mine. "But until then, you'll give me your number so I can be the only one to take you out."

It was cheesy. He was moving too fast.

I brought my phone between us and typed my answer. I couldn't voice long sentences. It had been too long since I was able to hear sounds for me to have perfected the intonation and subtle changes inside the mouth. ***You'll have to work for my phone number, Dante Leone.***

He smiled.

"I'd expect nothing less from you, Nix." His mouth brushed against mine, almost as if he couldn't stand not touching me, kissing me, feeling me. A whole-body shudder gripped me at his closeness. Then he straightened up, his smile turning into a wide grin. "You remember me, huh?"

I nodded. As if I could forget him. He was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen, but it was more than that. Him taking the blame for the broken vase had tattooed him permanently on my mind. When I saw him again two years ago as Reina and I were sneaking back from a night out, I never imagined this was where we'd one day end up.

The boy had become a man. One that suddenly had everyone else paling in comparison. Tall frame. Broad, strong shoulders. That face with the jawline that belonged on the cover of every romance book and GQ *magazine.*

I'd stake all my other senses that no woman could forget Dante Leone.

Lights from the dance floor and the marina beyond the club flashed through the large window, but it was just the two of us in here.

He brought his hand up to my cheek, brushing his knuckles against my skin. "Tell me what I have to do to get your number."

I signed the first thing that came to mind. "Kiss me."

And he did. His lips pressed to mine, sending tingles down my spine. Our tongues danced to the ancient songs. I inhaled him into my lungs, not realizing then that the scent of him would remain.

Then the kiss ended just as quickly as it started.

His hand gripped my hip and he moved in closer, pressing against me. I felt him grind into me, and raw desire coursed through me. It was lust at first sight. I didn't exactly believe in love, but this… this was intoxicating.

Dante wound his arms around my waist and shoulders, lifting me in the air. He grinned, walking us over to the bar, and set me on top of it.

I placed my phone on the bar top next to me as he stepped between my legs. He reached for my phone and I chuckled.

He raised his brow. "You owe me your phone number, Nix. A deal's a deal."

I rolled my eyes and snatched the phone from him, typing my reply with shaky fingers. ***I didn't say one kiss.***

The way his eyes sparkled with the challenge, I knew he'd bite. He kissed me roughly, touched me even rougher, and I loved it. But he never went further than that.

When I let out a noise of frustration, needing more, he just said, "I'm dating you first."

Then he kissed me some more. I felt the fireworks explode in the vibration of the building and I felt exhilarated at the thought of the year

ahead.

In a daze and barely remembering my name, I stood and made myself presentable, unaware of Dante hacking into my phone and sneaking in his number.

The memories shattered like the heart of a fragile young girl. If only I had known how wrong I'd been. That New Year, and every one after, signaled the start of my most challenging experiences yet.

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THIRTY-THREE

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DANTE

"You do know I'm not an on-call type of therapist, right?"

"Maybe."

"And I don't do house calls, especially not when my client is out of the country." She crossed her legs, her stilettos swinging back and forth. "I have other clients, and most of them are in Italy."

I rolled my eyes. "They'll live. I might not."

Dr. Freud's lips quirked. "Well, I did take an oath to help those in need. So let's get to it. And make it quick so I can get back to Italy."

We sat in the living room of my chateau outside Paris, vineyards stretching as far as the eye could see. Yes, I liked the building, but the location and the crop value were what drove my purchase.

I sat back in my chair, resting my ankle on my knee. "Don't worry, my plane will take you back."

She scoffed. "It better. And I'm billing for travel time."

"Of course."

She touched her pen to her chin, tilting her head. "Now, tell me. What is so urgent?"

"I want to know if it's possible to remember things through my dreams, even with my amnesia."

She didn't have my file; she didn't need it. She'd worked with me enough over the years, she probably knew everything I said by heart. She was itching to solve me, figure me out, like an unfinished puzzle.

"Sure, it's possible. When we sleep, certain self-imposed blocks lift, leaving us open to revisit more traumatic events. I believe your amnesia in its current state is self-imposed. I believe your behaviors to be more habits

than compulsions.” She paused, leaving her unsaid words to hang in the air like the ticking of a bomb. My unwavering gaze locked on her, urging her to continue. She swallowed. “I also highly suspect during your abduction —”

“I never said anything about an abduction.”

She didn’t contradict me and continued in a calm tone. “You were affected to the point that you couldn’t deal with the consequences. Whatever those were.”

I’d always found mental diagnoses boring and inconclusive, but not even I could deny this. Deep down I knew there was a reason I hated physical touch. My dick refused to get hard unless I pictured a certain brunette with blue eyes. Of course, sleeping with any other woman was out of the question. In the span of… well, forever… I had only fucked one woman—Phoenix Romero. And then she shot me.

Twenty-six years; one fuck. Being shot by that same woman. Yeah, that wasn’t working for me.

I needed to put that ring on Nix’s finger before I lost another marble.

I smirked. “So that’s your final diagnosis, Doc?”

“As of now.” She crossed her legs, averting her eyes for a moment. “So will you tell me what you remembered?”

I looked out the window, running a hand across my jaw while her thoughtful gaze settled on my face.

“Not much,” I finally said.

“I’ve often wondered how you got away with just a psychological evaluation after smashing the skulls of multiple men in that bar.” After several bourbons, I blacked out and went on a rampage. I wasn’t proud of my actions, and the thought of blacking out still haunted me.

“Lucky, I guess.” My eyes lowered to the weird symbol around her neck. “What is that symbol about?”

She lowered her eyes to the charm hanging off her necklace. “I don’t know. I just liked it and kept it.” She was lying, but I knew she wouldn’t divulge anything else about it. “I know you didn’t drag me all the way here to have a five-minute conversation or to talk about my necklace. So, should we get to the bottom of it?” My eyes met hers, but I remained silent. “Let me guess. The woman you’ve mentioned previously… She’s not around to calm your outbursts.”

“She’s always around.” I’d never told a more ridiculous lie. The only reason I saw her was because I stalked her like the creep she’d once accused me of being.

“Maybe. But maybe she doesn’t want to be.” My jaw tightened. “This ‘personality’ of yours… It’s merely a wall you’ve built up in your head to stop from visiting what you find to be most painful. To help you understand yourself, you need to know what happened. Understand it. It’s preventing you from moving on.”

“Sounds like a bunch of mumbo jumbo to me.”

Her lips lifted. “Again, why drag me here, then?” She clicked her pen. “You knew what my response would be.”

“Maybe I need a different solution,” I drawled.

She shook her head. “Unless you address your own demons, Dante, nobody’ll be able to control them. My guess is, you’re afraid you’ll lose her.”

“I don’t need relationship advice.” Fuck, I *wished* there were a relationship to discuss.

She smiled sadly. “You want me to tell you that you don’t need to deal with it, that the gaps in your memory will blow over. They won’t. And things will only get worse and cost you everything you love.”

A sardonic breath left me. “I thought you women believed in happily ever afters.”

This time she chuckled. “Haven’t you heard? Those come with great sacrifices.”

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THIRTY-FOUR

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DANTE

Rehearsal dinner.

More like a clown dinner in December. Phoenix and her sister, along with her caravan of friends, showed up looking like a traveling hippie circus. Yet, as my eyes tracked Phoenix, I couldn't help but smile.

Phoenix looked like a dandelion in her bright yellow sleeveless minidress. Yes, it was blinding and objectively hideous, but fuck it, I couldn't tear my gaze away from her. Apparently I suffered from another disorder that made it impossible to play it cool around her.

But goddamn, I loved a challenge. And this one had been ongoing, unreciprocated, for the past three years.

Reina, on the other hand, I could go without seeing or talking to. She was tipsy, flirting with barely of age boys and glaring at me at every turn. I'd taunted Amon, throwing subtle hints. My brother better do something about his woman because time was running out. Fuck, he only had a day left to throw his hat in the ring. I had the same amount of time to get the truth out of Reina. And then… switcheroo.

Reina Romero was never my endgame. That position had always been Phoenix's. My Nix. My dandelion. I'd wait a hundred lifetimes if I had to as long as they all led us to each other.

So here I was, studying the room while drinking my beer slowly, wanting to keep my wits about me tonight.

A mirrored bar was on my left, and on my right was a dance floor. Each corner was made up of seated areas. The sophisticated décor had made the girls' dresses look even more ludicrous. In fact, all five women looked like they intended to go to the circus but got lost on their way there. Thankfully,

the dim lighting in the club saved my eyes from the atrocious colors of their dresses, otherwise I was sure it would have blinded me.

I had to unravel the details of what had occurred between Reina and my father, as well as Diana and my father, so I could end this charade and snatch Phoenix once and for all.

I watched as Reina yanked another glass of champagne from a passing tray, but before she could bring it to her lips and get even more wasted, I grabbed her wrist.

"That's enough," I hissed under my breath.

"Take your hand off her." Amon's voice came from my side, cold with fury. Fucking finally. "Now."

I let out an amused breath. "Or what, brother?"

Reina and Amon got lost in each other's gazes, full of turbulence and vehemence. At least they both seemed to be on the same wavelength—unlike Phoenix, who only watched me with disdain.

"How long is this stare-down going to last?" I asked in a bored tone.

Phoenix came up to her sister then, and much to my delight, she must have been watching me, or reading my lips at least, because she signed, "*Would you shut the fuck up!*"

I couldn't stop thinking about this woman, and here she was, carrying on as if she couldn't stand me. If I could forgive her spraying me with mace and shooting me, she sure as fuck could get over her anger toward me.

"What is your problem with me?" I snapped.

A bitter laugh passed her lips. Fury flashed in her eyes, and then without a warning, Nix rammed her knee into my groin. I grunted, hunching over as pain shot through me. Fuck, the only woman who could stir my cock hated my guts.

"She's got issues," I grunted from my hunched position, staring at Phoenix's back. Why in the fuck was I always staring at her back? Reina laughed and my eyes narrowed on her. "And you, Reina, are a lousy drunk."

My "fiancée" spun toward me, equally as pissed off as her sister. If she so much as attempted to ram her knee into my balls, I'd murder someone.

"You… you're—" She seemed to search for the word. "You are the reason God invented the middle finger, dickwad."

"You're a spoiled brat."

She crossed her arms over her chest, fury quickly unfurling. "You're a liar, cheater, and—"

I straightened and flashed her a cold smile. “You’re shit-faced, so I’ll give you a pass.”

The girl was seriously starting to piss me off. It would require a blind person to see that this fucking wedding would never happen. Diana joined us then, and I narrowed my eyes on her, remembering that note I found in her safe.

Yapping and glaring continued until Romero finally grew some balls and asked Amon to take Reina home. *Now we’re talking*. I sighed a breath of relief.

As I watched them leave, I turned my attention to Nix, my eyes instinctively looking for the girl with dark curls in a bright yellow dress. I caught a glimpse of her as she made her way toward the bathrooms.

Reina and my brother forgotten, I excused myself from Romero and followed Nix. Like the creep we both knew I was, I cornered her outside the ladies’ room. She came to a sudden stop as we came face-to-face, a gasp leaving her lips. She glanced around as if hoping someone was there, but it was just the two of us.

“Hello, Nix. Long time no see.”

She glared. “*Not long enough*,” she signed in staccato movements.

She tried to pass me but I stepped in front of her, blocking her path. It’d been a long time since we played this game of cat and mouse.

“Don’t you think we have some talking to do?”

“*No*.”

“We do, and we can start with your apology for attempting to hurt our chances at expanding our family by kicking me in my balls.”

She tilted her head, trying to act innocent, but she didn’t fool me. Her skin was flushed. Her chest rose and fell rapidly. “*You’re not my family.*”

Her smile faltered as I took a sudden step forward, forcing her back to hit the wall. I brought my arms up, bracing my hands on either side of her.

A breath of air escaped her. Her scent of spring rain caged me in, although she was the one cornered.

“*What do you want*?” Her graceful fingers trembled. I gripped her wrist, holding her steady, and then brought her index finger slowly to my lips.

My gaze fell on the lock of her hair brushing my forearm. My cock instantly hardened, apparently intact from her earlier attempt at turning me into a eunuch.

The air sparked and her lips parted while the tension between us crackled. I couldn't resist, so like the bastard I was, I took advantage. My lips found hers and the little sound she made just about killed me. Her soft lips molded against mine as I kissed her.

She tasted as good as I remembered. No, *better*. Even the alcohol tasted like sweet filth on her tongue. She ran her fingers through my hair, her touch setting me on fire in a way I'd never been able to feel with anyone else.

My cock was hard as steel, twitching with the need to bury itself balls-deep inside her, when a noise startled me.

"Sorry, my bad." A voice startled us both, but neither one of us moved. Konstantin's right-hand man, Boris, stood in the hallway, clearly confused about seeing me kissing the wrong sister.

Phoenix, taking the opportunity, ducked and bolted past Boris, who shot me a look, smiling smugly. "What?" I snapped. "Aren't you supposed to be at the party, not fucking… *here*?"

Goddammit. I almost had her. If only this fucking idiot hadn't been intent on ruining my rehearsal dinner kiss—albeit with the wrong sister.

With her taste on my lips, I made my way back and found a quiet corner. Amon was tasked with taking Reina home before she could embarrass herself further, so I had free rein to watch Nix. Good luck to my brother handling the other Romero girl.

I'd need luck myself too, judging by Phoenix's cheerful welcome. My balls still ached from when she'd kneed me.

Relations had been tentative with Romero, and I didn't intend to alarm him before I could get my hands on his oldest daughter. So, I forced my aggravation aside, focusing on what I came here to do. Surviving this clusterfuck.

Removing my suit jacket, I rolled the sleeves of my shirt up past my forearms, forcing myself to relax.

Music was a steady hum in the background and my eyes locked on Phoenix who was surrounded by her friends.

"I'm surprised Luca DiMauro isn't here," Enrico Marchetti said, probably trying to distract me with conversation before I blew a gasket. He'd witnessed Nix kneeing me in my balls and he knew it didn't take much to push me over the edge. The reputation preceded me.

Marchetti ran a tight ship with his businesses. He had his own set of rules, his own way of doing things, which weren't always aligned with mine.

It was the reason we had the Omertà table. There, we were free to discuss and vote for important and often delicate matters.

"Why?" I drawled. "It's not like I talk to him much."

Luca DiMauro ran Sicily. He and Marchetti had a falling out a few years back, and I suspected he probably wanted to find a way to bury the hatchet. He leaned back in his chair as he flicked me a look.

His dark gaze put the fear of God in his enemies, but it'd take a lot more than that to scare me. I'd lived a hell of my own, even if I didn't remember it.

"You invited all the Omertà members, right?" Manuel, Enrico's uncle, asked. "You know those men are worse than scorned women. They'll moan and groan, then they'll bitch until they're blue in the face for not being invited."

I shrugged. "I gave the invitation list to Romero."

"Reina didn't handle it?" Manuel asked surprised, flicking a look at the girls minus Reina, who were doing yet another round of shots.

"Does it seem to you like she handled it?" I muttered under my breath. "My ears still hurt from her drunken words."

A few of Marchetti's loyal *soldati* roamed around, ensuring the safety of Enrico's sons and his new wife, Isla. Not that he needed them when he couldn't keep his eyes off her. The woman couldn't even sneeze without him noticing.

"No, I guess not," Manuel responded. "Should have known it when she showed up late." More than *late*, they'd almost missed the whole thing. I wouldn't have given two shits about it, except that it meant less time with Phoenix. "Where is she anyhow?"

"Romero asked Amon to take her home. Phoenix and the girls would go home with you and Marchetti."

Almost as though her ears were burning, Nix looked up and met my eyes. Her cheeks were flushed, but that icy glare still lingered. And then she added the finishing touch by promptly flipping me off.

"Your future sister-in-law isn't your biggest fan," Enrico remarked dryly. "In fact, it's almost as if she wants to kill you."

Manuel chuckled. “Judging by the way she kneed him in the balls, she *will* kill him.”

“Fucking funny.”

“Yeah, that looked like it hurt.”

Lovely, now Illias was inserting himself.

“If you’re going to be a smart-ass, keep walking, Konstantin,” I said matter-of-factly. “Or maybe I’ll entertain you with stories of your little sister.” It was only recently that Isla’s connection to the Pakhan had been revealed. Right around the time that she married Enrico Marchetti. “How much trouble do you think those five got into?”

A muscle flexed in his and Enrico’s jaws, and I let a chuckle loose. Truthfully, none of them knew the shit those girls got into when they decided to party.

“Watch yourself, Leone,” Konstantin said, his voice lethally calm and his face devoid of any emotion. The atmosphere took a distinct nosedive, and that was saying something considering it wasn’t cheerful to begin with.

“If Amon wasn’t so fond of you, I’d smash your face.” Obviously, Marchetti wasn’t my biggest fan either. Cry me a fucking river.

They all wanted the connection to the Yakuza, and my brother, being the prince of one of the most dangerous organizations in the world, helped. The relations between the Yakuza and the Omertà had always been strained at best. Amon’s heritage provided an edge over other organizations in the underworld.

“Why does it feel like you’re about to do something reckless?” Manuel stated, eyeing me with a suspicious gleam in his eyes. The fucker must have been watching Athena and picked up on something. It didn’t escape me the way he eyed her, like she was his next meal.

Konstantin let out a sardonic breath, his eyes sharpening on me. “Somehow I think you’re right, Manuel.”

I needed to remain two steps ahead of everyone, and once I followed through with my plan, I’d need all the help I could get not to get into a full-blown war with Romero. They said a smart man never divulged his plan until the timing was opportune and the success inevitable. Well, my timing was approaching, and then all hell would break loose.

Marchetti and Illias started discussing nannies. Supposedly Marchetti knew a nanny whisperer. Rolling my eyes, I tuned them out. I took a sip of my beer and draped an arm over the back of my chair, betraying no hint of

emotion on my face. Or eagerness. I was so close to rolling this plan out. I just needed Amon to get his fucking ass in gear.

Marchetti whistled under his breath. “Be careful what you risk, Dante.”

I worked hard to keep my temper in check. I didn’t need their fucking preaching.

“Probably too late,” Boris declared, waggling his brows. Where the fuck did he come from? I was so tempted to put a bullet in his skull and wipe out what he saw earlier. Instead, I ground my teeth down to my molars, counting to ten in my head before I turned tonight into a murder scene.

The waiter showed up, placing a bottle of scotch on the table alongside a bucket of beers.

A commotion reached my eardrums and the hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention. The women were approaching us, Phoenix included. Fuck, I loved her dark curls. Fuck the whole blonde thing. It didn’t do jack shit for me.

Phoenix Romeo, on the other hand, did it all. She could just flutter her eyes and I’d get a hard-on.

I watched her as she pushed her soft curls out of her eyes. The vein in my neck throbbed as I stared at her, needing her more by the second. She was the source of my blood flow, the oxygen in my veins. I couldn’t wait to make her mine.

“We’re ready to go,” Isla told her husband, smiling adoringly.

Enrico was on his feet in a heartbeat. “I’m ready whenever you are, dolcezza.” I had no fucking idea how he managed to keep up with her. Enrico was twice her age and twice as boring.

It took all my self-control to remain still while Enrico and Manuel ushered the drunk women out of here, every one of them shooting me glares. It would seem I was a popular topic of that group.

“I’m out too,” Konstantin announced as he stood up, adjusting his cuffs. “My wife’s pregnant and needs a lot of sleep.”

I scoffed. “The fact that she’s pregnant is a testament to the fact that she probably doesn’t get much sleep.”

He let out an amused breath. “I’m looking forward to witnessing how you fare in your own marriage.”

I sincerely doubted it, but I kept the comment to myself. The sooner he made himself scarce, the sooner I could go after Phoenix.

Ten minutes later, I made my way out of the venue and my steps faltered.

No. Fucking. Way.

As blood rushed to my head, I stared at the car, blinking a couple of times to make sure I was seeing straight.

Someone set my car on fire and I suspected I knew exactly who.

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THIRTY-FIVE

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PHOENIX

He was marrying my sister but watching me.

From the moment we arrived at this doomed rehearsal dinner, I'd felt his eyes burning a hole through me, and no amount of liquor could erase him from my memory.

He conveniently forgot me. Fucking again.

My anger was so strong I could kill him where he stood with a smile on my face. Okay, that might be far-fetched, but I was furious. Anger stretched in my chest, threatening to snap and let my fury loose.

Like he was my vice, my eyes kept connecting to his all evening. Each look he gave me seared, dark and hot, full of dark promises. God help me. If our plan to have Reina escape her marriage was unsuccessful, I'd spend the rest of my life craving and, at the same time, *hating* my sister's husband.

I jutted my chin spitefully, hoping he'd see the hate in my eyes rather than anything else. A muscle in his jaw tightened each time our gazes connected, and a small amount of satisfaction filled me. It might be petty, but I fully believed in the healing power of revenge.

Fuck taking the high road.

I was a woman scorned. He kissed *me*, but he was marrying my sister. I was good enough to fuck, but nothing else. What was the deal with that man? He must enjoy taunting me and making me feel like shit. My heart has been gouged. I was bleeding fire and lava and I needed an outlet.

Thankfully Isla's husband got a move on, or I might have done something stupid with witnesses all around me.

We said our goodbyes and I did my best to ignore his unflinching gaze as we made our way out of the venue. I'd gotten used to his eyes looking at me from the shadows, but out here in the open, it was a novelty.

The moment we stepped outside, the cold December air hit my heated cheeks. I'd thought it'd cool me off. It didn't. If anything, it made my fire burn hotter.

Manuel, Athena, Isla, and her husband walked in front of us while Raven and I fell slightly behind, both of us lost in our own thoughts.

A slick black Bugatti caught my eye and I halted in front of it. The tags read *Leone*, and I knew it didn't belong to Amon. I'd caught Dante following me in the flashy vehicle enough times that I'd recognize it anywhere. Even without the tags that broadcasted who was in it.

The Marchetti group and my girlfriends turned the corner, my eyes locked on the car. I imagined grabbing a baseball bat from somewhere and smashing the car windows.

My lips curved into a smile when an even better idea penetrated my intoxicated brain.

"Hey, you fell behind." Raven found herself next to me, following my gaze. "Is it Amon's?"

I grinned and shook my head. "*Do you have a lighter?*"

While she dug through her little clutch, I ripped a large piece of fabric off my dress. It was safe to assume I'd never wear it again.

Raven eyed me curiously but handed me the lighter without another word. I made my way to the Bugatti and unscrewed the cap of his gas tank.

Raven's eyebrows arched. "Are you doing what I think you're doing?"

I nodded.

It was good that it was Raven who fell behind. Athena would scold me, and Isla would try to stop me, worried about her husband's reputation. Raven would enjoy every minute of this. I shoved the fabric into the gas tank and told Raven to step back.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Did I? Hell no. I just hoped producers knew what they were talking about when these scenes were played out in the movies.

"*Step back.*" Once she was five feet away, I flicked the lighter and hovered it under the ripped piece of cloth. For several seconds, I watched the fire consume the rag until Raven yanked me back.

"Let's get out of here," she mouthed.

We didn’t waste any time. We got to Isla and her husband just as they were loading into his car.

“*Tell your husband to haul ass out of here*,” I signed, hoping the boom wouldn’t occur until we were long gone.

Once we were in our apartment, Raven and Athena retreated to the kitchen. I followed, debating whether I should say anything to them, when my phone lit up.

My brows scrunched when I saw it was Isla. She’d only just dropped us off, officially living in her husband’s luxurious Paris home now.

I slid the message open.

There was an explosion after we left. Know anything about it?

I typed back my response.

No.

I rushed to Reina’s bedroom, needing to talk to her. We were going to go over our plan again, although I didn’t see the need. We just needed to get the fuck away from this city and the Leone brothers.

My steps halted at her open doorway. *She’s not here*. Everything in her room looked the same as it had when we left. Before I could wonder about what was going on, my phone vibrated again.

It was Grandma.

Reina’s not responding. Tell her I have a dress for her to wear. She’s not wearing black to her own wedding.

My eyes fell on the dress in question. Black. Elegant. Beautiful. Definitely not appropriate for a wedding.

Yet, Reina was nowhere to be found. Then I remembered.

She left with Amon. My stomach sank. If Amon had her, there was no way he’d bring her here to be married off to another man—his brother, no less. I saw the way he’d watched her the entire night. The way he beat up that bartender. The way he glared at his brother.

Yeah, he wasn’t going to let his brother have her. I should have known.

I headed back to the kitchen where Raven and Athena were chuckling, staring at a TikTok video. I leaned against the doorframe and just watched them, knowing that this would be goodbye.

I'd have to run with or without Reina, and my sixth sense warned it'd be without her.

Those damned Leone brothers were always meddling in our lives, but I knew my sister could handle Amon. She wasn't a pushover. Maybe she and Amon would even find a way back to each other. The way he watched her —like she was the only one in the room—had to count for something. Reina wasn't over him either.

Raven's eyes lifted from her screen, finding mine. The name fit her perfectly, the tint to her hair holding midnight-blue hues through its strands.

"You okay?" she signed.

I nodded with a forced smile on my face, and my gaze traveled over the small kitchen that had taken us through many family meals over the years. I didn't trust my hands not to shake or my eyes to betray me, so I just mouthed a soundless, "*Good night.*"

Almost as if she sensed this was goodbye, she came up and hugged me. My eyes darted to Athena who was still lost in the TikTok world. I personally didn't see the appeal in those videos, but I also knew I was in the minority there.

With one last squeeze, I turned and made my way into my bedroom.

I reached for my phone and messaged Grandma.

I need to see you. Tonight.

In my closet, I found my packed bag already waiting. Just as I pulled it out and started shoving some of my toiletries into it, my phone lit up again. It was Grandma's reply.

I just saw you.

I typed my response, anger simmering through my veins.

You'll see me again, or I'll tell Papà about our secret.

Then, to ensure she understood I meant business, I sent another message.

Tonight.

I watched the bubbles on the screen appear and disappear. Again and again, until the reply came in, surprisingly short.

Ok.

I padded back into my sister’s room and lowered to my knees by her bed. She had a box of keepsakes stashed with our runaway money. It was only ten thousand. It wasn’t enough, but it was something. Then I returned to my own room and grabbed my bag and my counterfeit passport. When Grandma had taken me to the clinic in New York, she’d insisted we couldn’t travel under our real identities.

Getting changed out of my dress, I scribbled a note for my friends, explaining what I couldn’t in person. The foolish mistake I’d made five years ago, falling for the mysterious stranger who promised me everything and gave me nothing. He vowed there was nobody else, but then that very same person had chosen Reina over me. I couldn’t be his second choice.

I couldn’t tell them about the baby. Not yet.

I left the note on my desk where they were sure to see it, and with my bag slung over my shoulder and money in my wallet, I peered into the hallway. Athena and Raven had gone to bed, meaning it was time to go.

The first stop would be to see my grandmother who was staying at the Waldorf Astoria Versailles. Only the best for her. I shook my head. It no longer mattered. I needed to get answers and more money out of her. Then, I’d scour this earth for my child.

I’d right the wrong. One way or another, I’d find my baby.

I made a stop at the hotel and found my grandmother already waiting for me in the lobby in a silk robe, a grim look on her face.

Tough shit.

She had no right to do what she did. I saw that clearly now.

“What is this about, Phoenix?” she demanded, her hands on her hips.

I straightened my shoulders so I could appear taller and stronger. “*I want two million dollars. And information on my baby.*”

There. I dropped the bomb, and there was no retracting it. Not that I'd want to even if I could.

The look on her face told me she wanted to strangle me. Let her fucking try. I was no longer that scared girl. This time, I'd save myself. This time, I'd get answers or she'd see how vicious I could get.

"You know that's confidential information," she mouthed, not even bothering to sign ASL.

"*And you know that I never signed off on the adoption. I was a legal adult, meaning you either falsified my signature or you used your connections to make an illegal adoption go through.*"

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. *Boom.*

"You ungrateful little—"

I wrapped my fingers around her wrist and tightened my grip, shooting her an icy glare. "*Careful, Grandma.*"

Monsters came in different shapes and sizes. The one that loomed over me came in the form of a retired sixty-something Hollywood starlet. I'd never forgiven her for the way she treated Mamma, but when she took my baby from me, she became a full monster.

I tolerated her, but all along, I was waiting for my chance to pounce, my way to simply be strong enough.

Now that I watched her face, distorted with anger and disappointment, all the bitter memories came rushing back with a vengeance. The loneliness I experienced during pregnancy. The pain at having my baby taken away without being given the chance to cradle them in my arms.

Grandma was still a beautiful woman, but Christ she was shallow. Her decision five years ago destroyed me. Losing my hearing was a bump in the road. Dante's betrayal broke my heart. But it was losing my baby that broke me and made me hate Grandma forever.

My legs trembled and every fiber in me quaked, but I ignored it. If I could fight Dante Leone, I was certainly capable of getting through this.

I dragged her to the sofa and sat her down before taking my spot on the chair opposite her.

"*I want to know where my baby is,*" I signed. "*Then you're going to hand over my inheritance*." Because I planned on living the rest of my days with my child. He or she would be turning five soon.

New Year's Eve baby. It was where it all began and ended for me. On New Year's Eve.

Grandma lifted her hands decorated with diamonds and started to sign. “You can’t get the money until your twenty-fifth birthday, and the baby, she’s no longer yours.”

My heart stilled for a long moment.

She. I had a little girl somewhere out there. Deep down, the part of me that had been dormant awakened and sang with hope. I could feel it rushing through my veins.

“*You lied to me*.” Grandma’s eyes widened, being caught. She told me she didn’t know the gender of my baby, when she clearly did.

“It was for your own good,” she claimed, quick to defend herself. “What would it matter if you knew if it was a boy or a girl? You’d only torture yourself more.”

Emotion gripped my throat and I found it hard to breathe, but I quickly got myself together. There’d be time for tears later. Right now, I needed to get on the road before Dante caught up to me. But first, I’d get what I came for.

“*I’m dying a bit each day without my baby. She is mine*,” I claimed. “*I’m going to find her, and I’m going to fight for her. And you’re going to help me by telling me who has her.*”

“Phoenix, you know I can’t do that.”

“*But I can announce to the world what you’ve done.*” I was impressed that my hands weren’t trembling. I was going for what belonged to me and nobody—fucking nobody—would stop me. I tapped my fingers against my chin pensively before I continued signing. “*I wonder how much time you’d be sentenced to in prison for falsifying documents. I wonder if they consider that kidnapping. Maybe even human trafficking. What do you think?*”

“You wouldn’t!”

I squared my shoulders and flashed a cold smile. I wondered if I looked as terrifying and unhinged as Dante Leone, but then I immediately shoved the thought out of my mind. There was no room for him, not when I needed this plan to succeed. Failure might actually kill me.

“*Don’t test me.*”

Grandma’s blue eyes started to shimmer as she held back her tears. A better person would cave, but I didn’t. She was an actress through and through. I was done being the victim.

“Phoenix, please don’t do this.”

“*You hold all the cards, Grandma*.” The first tear rolled down her plastic-filled cheekbones, but I didn’t—couldn’t—feel sorry for her. “*Give me what I need, and I’ll be on my way. I need it tonight.*”

Maybe I had more of Papà in me than I thought, or maybe I’d just reached my tipping point. I didn’t know. What I did know was that I couldn’t be a sitting duck. If Amon took Reina and the two married, I was bound to be a replacement and get caught in the crossfire of the Leone and Romero contract.

He didn’t want to marry *me* as his first choice. Fine. I didn’t want *him* as his second choice. So round and round we went.

“I can give you two million, but you’ll have to go to the U.K. to withdraw it.”

“*Fine.*” Two million would support my daughter and me until I turned twenty-five, and then I’d be cleared to receive the rest. “*I want to know where she is.*”

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THIRTY-SIX

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DANTE

"Yours?" Darius appeared out of nowhere, his tone smooth as he watched firemen extinguish the fire. The car was history. "Bummer."

"At least he didn't end up in the hospital this time," Cesar grumbled, and I shot him a warning look which he apparently didn't understand. "I bet you she wanted to set the car on fire with you in it."

I really needed to tape his mouth shut.

"Who?" Darius's interest was clearly piqued. "Reina?"

"Why would Reina want to set me on fire?" I spat, annoyed with both of them. "We barely talk."

He shrugged. "Dunno. She doesn't seem keen on marrying you."

"As if I give a fuck," I muttered under my breath. My phone buzzed and I slid it open. It was a text from Marchetti.

Reina and Phoenix have disappeared.

I typed my reply, heart pounding.

When? How do you know?

It took a minute before Marchetti's reply came in.

Raven messaged Isla. She happened to go into Phoenix's room and found a note. She also seems to think Reina wasn't home when they got there. Didn't Amon take her home?

And so it began. I suspected my brother must have grabbed Reina, but Nix's disappearance was an unexpected wrench in my plans. Maybe Reina convinced my brother to take her sister along. It was a plausible explanation.

I dialed up Amon, but it went straight to voicemail. Fuck! I tried again, then tried to pin his location. We always shared locations, no matter what. My brows furrowed. *Nothing.* That seemed wrong.

"Everything okay?" Darius must have picked up my strained expression.

"Reina never got home."

His shoulders tensed. "It's not the Brazilians, right?" What an odd comment to make. He must have read my confusion because he said, "My gym was attacked. Reina happened to be there. I didn't think anything of it, but after questioning one of the men, it seemed they were after her."

I gritted my teeth. "You didn't think to mention that earlier?"

"Well, it just happened. The fucker only talked this afternoon. It seemed an odd time to bring up the Brazilians during this rehearsal dinner. This event was weird enough."

I shook my head. "What if the Brazilians attacked while we were here?"

He rolled his eyes. "I put extra surveillance on this place and her apartment." Of course he did. "Do you think they got to her?"

I shook my head. "No, I think Amon has her."

He let out an amused breath. "Ah, a love triangle."

I flipped him off. "Fuck you and your triangles. Any chance I can get a copy of the apartment surveillance?"

Darius flashed me a grin. "If you ask nicely."

I gritted my teeth. "Please." I was starting to see why Amon wanted to murder the man.

"Why, yes. I would love to share my intel with you." He grinned and reached for his phone. A second later, my own phone buzzed and I slid the message open, fast-forwarding through the surveillance footage. Amon and Reina never arrived at the apartment, but Phoenix did, and not long after, she left. Alone.

I turned to Cesar. "Check all train and bus stations, airports, anything. Phoenix took off." Then I dialed up my mother.

Riiing. Riiing. Riiing.

No answer. What the fuck was it with everyone tonight? Was it a full moon and I missed it? I pulled up the tracker I had on her devices and saw she wasn't even in Paris. She was in Japan.

"Cesar, go check Amon's penthouse," I said, although I doubted he was there. If he kidnapped Reina, he would be on the move. "I'm going to see if Phoenix is with her grandmother."

"Do you think Phoenix could be with Amon?" Cesar asked. While it'd be better if they were all together, I sincerely doubted she was with them.

I went to get my car when I remembered I no longer *had* a car. Fuck, had Phoenix planned this all along so I couldn't follow her?

"Cesar, I need a fucking ride," I snapped and flicked a look at Darius. "Check to ensure the Brazilians don't have either one of them. I'll stay in touch."

Then I whirled around and stormed down the block toward Cesar's car.

"Maybe you should let her go," Cesar called out to me, hot on my trail. "She's already shot you, maced you, set your car on fire—"

"That could have been someone else," I snarled.

The look he gave me called me out on my bullshit. Fair enough.

"What is your obsession with her?" he muttered.

If only I fucking *knew*. For some reason, I couldn't get her out of my head. And after three years of keeping my distance, I only wanted her more.

And now she'd run. Goddammit, it shouldn't be this hard to get a woman to fall for you.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

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DANTE

My driver came to a stop in front of Marchetti's restaurant, Rosa Spinosa, in Rome.

Cesar climbed out of the car, his eyes sharp on our surroundings, then stepped aside to hold the door for me. The man was downright paranoid.

Marchetti and Agosti stood outside, dressed in impeccable Italian suits, looking like businessmen rather than the heads of one of the five Italian families. Romero and Konstantin stood right inside the glass door of the restaurant, and by the looks of it, they were arguing. DiMauro wasn't here which wasn't surprising, but Aiden Callahan was.

"Dante," Marchetti greeted me.

"Was it really necessary to have this meeting here? We were all in Paris. It would have made sense to do this there."

"I had some business with Ghost in Italy," Marchetti answered vaguely.

I heard Romero's voice as he came through the door behind me. "Are we going to stand here and bullshit all night?" he snapped. "My daughters have disappeared and you two are shooting the shit."

"I didn't know you were familiar with the term," I deadpanned.

The Omertà was a lifetime commitment—to its members and its cause. One way in and one way out. It didn't matter if there was a member we didn't like, like Romero, you still had to listen to their shit. I was usually friendly enough, but Romero always rubbed me the wrong way.

We made our way inside, shedding our weapons by the entrance. I couldn't help but snicker at the formalities. As if any of us would come out unscathed if shit were to go down.

The Mediterranean vibes were everywhere in the restaurant—in painted motifs of vineyards, Roman ruins and statues, and Sardinian beaches. The tinted bulletproof windows blocked the view from the outside and kept the elegance inside.

I took in the men at the table. All the usual faces were here, except for my brother. Luca DiMauro I had given up on seeing ever again. This Callahan dude might as well get re-baptized as an Italian at this rate.

“I want my daughters back,” Romero said, slamming his fist against the table.

“Are we sure they didn’t… run off?” Romero shot a death glare at an unfazed Agosti. “Just saying. I have a younger sister and she seems to disappear with her friends all the time.”

“All her friends are accounted for,” Romero snapped.

“Except for Phoenix,” I chimed in unhelpfully.

“Maybe Reina went with Amon willingly?” Illias suggested, familiar with their history.

Romero shook his head frantically. “She wouldn’t be that irresponsible. I need assistance getting my girls home.”

I snickered. “What if she doesn’t want to be saved?”

“Amon snatched my daughters. I trusted him,” he said with a dark expression. “He must be dealt with.”

“Maybe he learned Reina killed Angelo Leone,” I snapped. “Your daughters aren’t exactly innocent angels.”

Okay, not exactly how I planned to break the news, but to hell with it. That fucker Romero couldn’t be bashing Amon without getting something in return. Sometimes I wondered why I bothered to plan. Things always went to shit. It worked out best when I flew by the seat of my pants.

“That’s impossible,” Romero hissed. “They can’t even operate a gun.”

Fucking wrong. Both of his daughters were clearly capable of shooting and killing. I had the scar to prove it.

Konstantin let out a groan, giving me an *Are you mad* look. *Probably*. I looked at Marchetti, who watched the exchange with disapproving silence. He wasn’t a fool and was probably working out what was going on.

“Elaborate, Dante,” Marchetti demanded. “You cannot expect to drop a bomb like that and not raise concerns.”

Fuck, let’s hope that Isla had Marchetti wrapped around her little finger. The girls were close, and she wouldn’t let her husband hurt her best friend.

“The clips I’ve been receiving…” I started. “They revealed my father’s murderer. The footage captured Reina.”

“Do we believe it?” Callahan asked, and we all shot him wry looks. There hadn’t been a member complaining about false clippings yet.

“I don’t give a shit what the video shows,” Romero chimed in. “I want my daughters back.”

So did I. I didn’t care which one I found first, because if it were Reina, she could help me track Nix down if she wasn’t with her. If I had to leverage this video, I would. Reina would help me locate Phoenix.

My phone buzzed and I flicked a glance at it, reading the notification. My mother’s location had finally registered. She was in the Philippines.

I had a bad feeling.

I’d been on Amon’s trail—correction, Mother’s trail for weeks now, but something wasn’t clicking. Everything seemed wrong in some way—not being able to get in touch with my brother, Reina and Phoenix were out of my reach… and my gut warned Nix wasn’t with them. But I still held out hope that she snuck out to meet her sister.

“Is everything okay?” Cesar asked, sensing my mood. I nodded, although nothing seemed to be fucking okay. “You think your brother’s taking them to the Philippines?”

Reina, yes. Phoenix, no.

But it was pointless to guess about it. I’d work through the process of elimination. If Phoenix wasn’t here and Reina was, then I’d question Reina about Father’s death and her sister’s location.

My private jet landed in Jolo and I disembarked with Cesar behind me. The hot temperature forced me to shed off my blazer and roll up the sleeves of my white dress shirt.

My usual vehicle waited for me along with a few of Amon’s guards I usually used when I came to visit him in the Philippines. Darius and River, two of Kian’s men, were here too. It would seem we were all following leads.

“Dante,” one of the guards greeted me.

“Alexander.” He was one of the expats Amon found that had no connections to the underworld. Ex-military. Efficient. Married to a local woman. Sometimes you wanted men like that on your payroll. They just wanted a paycheck and didn’t concern themselves with the politics of the mafia.

“Have you seen Amon?” His furrowed brow was my answer. But I knew he was here, because this was where Mother’s location pinpointed after jumping all over the globe. It was too much of a coincidence not to follow.

“Do me a favor, Alexander.”

“Sir?”

“Ask the border patrol if they’ve seen Amon, and if so, who was he with.”

As he headed to talk to the border patrol, I turned my attention to Darius. “You following me, stalker?”

He narrowed his eyes. “That’s on your résumé, not mine.”

Touché. “You’re just jealous your stalking skills aren’t up to par.” He better not be stalking my dandelion or else I’d end him. I stared out into the distance, the afternoon sun simmering on the blacktop. “Were you able to get through to Reina or Amon?” I asked.

“No. You?”

I shook my head. “I don’t have a good feeling.”

“Ditto.” He brought out his gun and checked his bullets. I had a full magazine too.

“If you two girls are done playing, let’s get to Reina,” River announced. “If I have to listen to Darius’s whining for one more day, I’m going to lose my shit.”

I grinned, liking River a whole lot more already.

Alexander returned. It only took two bribes to get confirmation of Amon passing through here an hour ago with a woman. One blonde woman.

Fuck.

As disappointment sunk to the pit of my stomach, I realized that all along I had been hoping not to be right. Three years and my obsession with the oldest Romero daughter had only manifested itself.

Nix—my tough dandelion—was the sole owner of my desires. I even attempted to search for another woman to fuck, but my cock had reverted to

its old habits, refusing interest in any other pussy. Every time I even thought about Phoenix, the little fucker jumped to life, straining against my pants.

I swiftly slid into the back of the car, Cesar next to me while Alexander took his spot behind the wheel with his associate in the passenger seat. River and Darius took the next car.

“We have the ammo in the back,” Alexander stated as he started the car. “We just picked it up and were transporting it to the compound.”

The feeling of doom I’d had since I’d started this journey just intensified.

As Alexander drove out, I kept my gaze sharp on the surroundings. There was only one way from the airport to Amon’s compound, and nothing ever happened here, but I was on edge.

The next moment, I knew exactly why.

The sound of explosions and screeching tires echoed in the air. The four of us went on high alert. I flicked a glance in the rearview mirror and spotted River and Darius coming to a screeching halt.

A stream of bullets sounded in the distance and it was then I spotted them. Amon. Reina. Crawling to each other, filthy and bloodied, surrounded.

I jumped out of the car, pulled out my gun, and started shooting.

Alexander and Cesar were behind me, River and Darius too, bullets flying in every direction from machine guns. I jumped behind the car and started aiming. I shot two men, but I also missed a few. I was low on ammunition, but in the next second, Alexander opened the trunk and threw me a grenade.

A car revved in my direction, but I shot the tire. It swerved to the side, approaching us at a maddening speed. So I shot the other three tires.

“It’s the Brazilians,” Darius shouted. “The Cortes cartel.”

Returning my gaze to my brother and his woman, blood roared in my ears.

My eyes lowered to the grenade. Fuck it.

“Heads down, fuckers! I’m resorting to drastic measures.”

Then I threw it through the air. *Boom!*

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THIRTY-EIGHT

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PHOENIX

I stared up at the white ceiling of my hotel room in upstate New York. I'd been to five different cities over the last few weeks. After leaving Grandma, I went to the airport, colored my hair auburn, bought a decoy airfare ticket, and took the train to London where my two million dollars awaited me.

From there, I flew to New York City where I checked into a hotel for a night. I found the address of the family who adopted my baby girl, only to learn they moved to Connecticut. So, I bought a used Jeep Wrangler and made my way there.

My next stop was a disappointment. The family died in a tragic accident two years prior, and just as I was about to have a major breakdown, the old man remembered that the baby girl survived because she'd been at home with a nanny.

Then I found the nanny who lived in a little town called Victor, New York. She was a sixty-year-old woman with laugh wrinkles I had never seen on my own grandmother. The old woman fed me cookies, tea, and love-filled stories of the little baby she got to watch for eight months. According to her, the family had loved her too.

"Skye," she mouthed. My heart stilled in my chest before it resumed its chaotic drumming. *Skye*. *Skye*. *Skye*. My daughter's name was beautiful. Perfect. I couldn't wait to meet her. "That's her name. I sure hope they kept it."

I pulled up my burner smartphone and typed a note.

Do you know what happened to her after her family died?

The old woman pushed her glasses up her nose and read my question, her shoulders slumping.

“They took her back to the agency.”

It was how I found myself back in upstate New York in the same little town where I had given birth almost five years ago.

My hope flickered and dimmed with each breath.

I hadn’t anticipated so many obstacles. It was probably childish, but somehow I thought I’d find my baby at the first stop and we’d be happily reunited. Yet here I was, alone in a hotel room on Christmas Day, longing for my sister, my friends, and most of all my baby.

I reached for my phone.

I sat up, groaning, and scrolled through it, wrapping the blanket tightly around myself. I checked my phone every day despite the fact that I knew my friends didn’t have my number. I couldn’t be traced. Yet, today, I had to fight the irresistible urge to call my sister and talk to her. I hadn’t seen her face in weeks.

I really hoped she found happiness. One of us should.

Rising out of bed, I made my way to the window seat, still wrapped in my blanket, and pulled my knees to my chest. It was almost noon, and very cold despite the heater running at full blast. A blanket of white stretched outside as far as the eye could see. I searched up Spotify on my phone and pressed play. I couldn’t hear the soft tunes, but I read the words, letting my imagination run wild with the music in my head, hoping it’d erase this loneliness.

I lifted my head and stared out the window, chanting Lana Del Rey’s words to the song “Chemtrails Over The Country Club” in my head, playing the melody the way I imagined it would sound.

My heart trembled, loneliness gripping my chest. Sobs I desperately tried to choke down burned my throat and the tears in my eyes burned.

The last Christmas I spent alone flickered in my mind. I tried desperately to chase it away, but unlike other times, it refused to recede. Instead, it powered through, tearing at my heart once again.

My room that had been my home for the past two months was decorated in gold and green colors. Grandma hired a crew to come and put up a tree and set gifts under it.

But she didn’t come. Of course she didn’t. She had husband number five to impress.

It was yet another stab to the heart, even though I should've known better. Reina was the only one who never disappointed me. I missed her like crazy. This was the longest we'd been apart ever.

Wearing my knee-high stockings and a sweater that came down past my thighs, I sat on the white-tiled floor in front of the window that stretched from floor to ceiling, then read her last message on my phone.

> It's not Christmas without you. I don't care about contagious illnesses. We could have at least seen each other through the glass.

It was a lie to keep Reina from coming. It took a whole lot of convincing and reassurance that I was almost better, but as an added precaution, Grandma cut her access to money and took her passport.

There were times when I imagined telling her, knowing the two of us could disappear to raise my baby alone. Fashion was all she'd ever wanted to do though, and I couldn't destroy her dream. So, I kept quiet and prayed for him *to come.*

I reached for my necklace where the pager and promise ring hung. My fingers wrapped around the little black device and found the tip.

Click. Click. Click.

He said it'd alert him of my location wherever I was. It hadn't worked so far, but the repetitive motion soothed me like a stress ball.

Each time I pressed the button though, my heart cracked a bit more. I knew by now that it was broken, but I still hoped.

My bones rattled but it had nothing to do with the cold. Every day was a new heartbeat. A new disappointment.

Click. Click. Click.

"Just this once," I whispered to the empty room. "Just this once, save us."

I tried to picture how that would look. He'd burst through the door, worry etched on his beautiful face. His arms would wrap around me and he'd call me his Nix. Or his dandelion. He would hold me tightly, then swoop me up and take me away. Somewhere nobody could take the baby from me. From us.

We would dance through life together. Just as he promised.

It was becoming a delusion at this point.

My eyes traveled over the wrapped gifts under the tree that I hadn't bothered to open. There was nothing I wanted in them.

The only things I wanted were this life growing inside me and the man who wasn't coming.

I could feel the hope in my chest dimming by the day, slowly reducing me to ash.

My phone buzzed in my hand, taking me out of the past and shoving me into the present. I looked down, seeing the email from the clinic director agreeing to see me tomorrow.

A step closer to my daughter.

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THIRTY-NINE

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PHOENIX

I had never dreamt I'd end up in New Orleans when I started this search for my baby. After I went back to where it all started, I demanded to speak with the director about my daughter's birth. As it happened, the poor woman just started working there that week. It ended up working to my advantage though.

Once she pulled out my file, the admission of negligence was written all over her face. The clinic had wronged me. I threatened to bring a lawsuit, and she gave me information on the foster home that took my baby after the death of her first adoptive family.

From there, I followed the trail all the way here.

My daughter had been adopted by Branka and Sasha Nikolaev. I prayed wholeheartedly that they had no connection to the Russian Nikolaev family, but deep down, I knew it had to be them. I was *screwed*. You didn't have to be an active member of the underworld to know you didn't fuck with the Nikolaevs.

All the creative curses I'd learned echoed in my mind.

New Orleans's January temperatures were comfortable. The bright sunshine combined with it being a Sunday afternoon drew people out for leisurely strolls. The scent of baked goods drifted through the air as I watched people smile and laugh, chatting to each other animatedly.

I'd already circled the block where the notorious The Den of Sin was—the club owned by the Nikolaev family—in hopes of catching a glimpse of them. Maybe I'd run into them by accident and start a conversation. Or maybe I could just flat-out approach them and tell them that Skye was my daughter and I wanted her back.

But I wasn’t brave enough for any of that. Some days I’d even sit on the bench by the neighboring park, eat my breakfast or lunch, and watch the club as if it were my sole purpose in life.

In this vibrant, bustling city, my loneliness was magnified. It ate at my soul, and despite the rays of sunshine all around, the world felt dark.

Two months without my sister and friends felt like an eternity. My heart ached so much, it felt as if thorns had been lodged into its tender flesh. A lone tear rolled down my cheek and I brushed it away angrily, but then another and another followed. I wiped those away too. No crying.

I was so close to getting my hands on my baby. I should be happy and excited, not bawling my eyes out.

Catching a few curious glances, I turned the corner and found a little oasis of green grass along with a large, empty playground. I headed for an empty bench to sit on, my mind anywhere but here.

How will I get my baby back?

I bullied the director of the clinic to hand me the paperwork, including the original birth certificate, but bullying parents into handing over their child was an entirely different thing. According to the foster records, this was Skye’s fourth family. For some reason, finding a long-term placement had been a problem. The file indicated *difficulty communicating*, but there was no elaboration beyond that.

Although it did make me worry about my next predicament. *How in the hell will I communicate with my daughter?*

The stones were stacking against me. I couldn’t kidnap her without scaring her to death, let alone I wouldn’t be able to drag her kicking and screaming around the world.

Unless Skye hadn’t bonded with her family and we ended up clicking. She was my flesh and blood, that had to count for something. But she’d been with Branka and Sasha Nikolaev for several months now.

Dammit. This was a problem I didn’t know how to solve.

Then there was the matter of travel documents. I had gotten in contact with someone over the dark web who came highly recommended for forging fake passports. Once I had a picture, I could book his services. He —I assumed it was a *he*—would get it to me within forty-eight hours.

A movement to my right interrupted my train of thought and I looked over. My breath caught when I noticed a little girl seated next to me, alone

and crying. She was small, two dark pigtails tied at the ends with a yellow ribbon.

Tears rolled down her flushed cheeks and my heart clenched. Looking around, I didn't see anyone. Where were her parents?

Unsure how to comfort her without words, I dropped to my haunches. Careful not to scare her, I tapped her knee lightly.

Her brilliant, sky-blue eyes met mine. Her mouth opened, then closed, then she started crying harder, her eyes darting around.

I tapped her knee gently again and her gaze came back to me.

"Where is your mommy?" I mouthed, praying she'd understand me. I fought the instinct to sign, not wanting to confuse the kid even more. My throat vibrated, but I wasn't sure if I was saying anything. Oddly enough, self-consciousness about my voice was overridden by the little girl's distress.

Someone walked by and gave me a narrowed look. I resisted the impulse to flip them off. It would be inappropriate to do so in front of the child, and I certainly didn't need to draw attention to myself.

"*Branka didn't want to come to the playground.*"

My heart stopped, and for a moment, I couldn't breathe. My lungs constricted as I stared at the little girl whose face suddenly looked familiar. She was the spitting image of me and Reina when we were that age. And she was signing in ASL. Then, if that wasn't enough evidence, the name *Branka* should be my confirmation. It wasn't a common name.

Yet, my mind cautioned me. *Don't jump to conclusions, Phoenix. Keep your shit and wits together.*

Her lip trembled and my heart rearranged itself in the most peculiar way. It took everything not to break down and start crying. I knew—deep down in my heart and without a doubt—this was Skye.

My baby girl was sitting next to me!

"*Who's Branka*?" I asked, signing back while my lips trembled.

She blinked and stopped crying, studying me curiously. "*You can sign?*"

Biting my lip hard to stop it from trembling, I nodded. "*Yes. I lost my hearing when I was a little girl*."

Her eyes got big, though they were still glistening with tears.

"*Me too.*" I gave her a shaky smile despite the whirlwind of emotions twisting in my chest and the lump in my throat. She was still a little girl,

younger than I was when I lost my hearing. “*How old were you when you lost your hearing, lady?*”

The unexpected disappointment washed over me. I didn’t expect her to call me mommy. After all, she’d never met me. But I couldn’t help the irrational part of me from feeling disappointed.

I squashed it down and immediately scolded myself.

“*My name is Phoenix*,” I signed, then extended my hand.

She shook it without hesitation, while I fought the urge to pull her into a hug. I’d give my life just to wrap her in my arms and feel her small heartbeat safely tucked into my embrace.

Don’t scare her, Phoenix.

I couldn’t let go of her hand though. Just another second. I wanted to feel her soft, dainty fingers in mine for just *one* more second. Fighting my motherly instinct—or whatever this was—I released her hand reluctantly, grateful for the contact, no matter how cold I now felt. The thing that was denied to me five years ago when she was born.

“*My name is Skye*.” This time it was impossible to stop my lips from trembling, and one stubborn tear rolled down my cheek as the lump in my throat squeezed. I was shaking my daughter’s hand. She was right in front of me, and she was perfect. A tiny human being that already owned my heart. “*Sasha says I shouldn’t talk to strangers*.”

“*Are Branka and Sasha your mommy and daddy*?”

She bobbed her head, then raised her hand, holding up four fingers. “*They are my fourth family. They learned ASL for me.*”

Suddenly the comment in her file made perfect sense, because her trouble with communication was due to her hearing. It was difficult on my own mamma and papà. While Reina picked it up effortlessly, they struggled. Grandma too. Even to this day, she was better at understanding ASL than signing it.

This was all my fault. I should have been stronger and fought Grandma tooth and nail to keep her. Hell, I should have run away and raised my baby alone. To hell with the world. To hell with Grandma and Papà.

I failed her, the thought resonated through me, loud and clear.

Her eyes lowered to my hand and her nose scrunched. I followed her gaze, noting she was staring at my phone. It was an iPhone 11—my latest burner phone—and, puzzled at her reaction, I asked her, “*What’s the matter*?”

“*That phone has battery issues and display screen problems.*” Huh? I stared at her blankly, not following her words. Yes, I understood them individually, but all together, I had no idea what she was saying. She must have read the confusion in my eyes. “*You need a new, better phone.*” It was safe to say she didn’t inherit that skill from me. Maybe her physical traits, but definitely not this technology stuff. “*You dress nicely though.*”

My eyes fell down to my outfit. I wore a blue Chanel midi dress with white ballet flats made by the same designer. Courtesy of my sister. It was casual enough to be comfortable, although it left me wondering why Reina would have set aside something like that for me.

“*Thanks. You’re not looking too shabby either*.”

She rolled her eyes. “*Branka and Sasha let me wear casual, comfortable clothes. My aunt insisted I had to look fancy.*” My lip twitched at her disdain. She definitely got that from me. I preferred comfort over designer wear any day. Reina was my fashion police.

God, I missed my sister. I’d even let her dress me up every day at this point. Hell, I’d wear high heels if it meant she could be with me. Newfound worry swarmed my heart, but I didn’t let it overwhelm me. Amon wouldn’t hurt her. I saw it in his eyes when he watched her. It was the kind of look that would set you on fire if you stepped between them.

If there was love, it had to be close to the look they so often shared, raw and vehement yet soft and patient.

I was certain Reina was safe with Amon. It was the right choice not to reach out to her. Especially now that I’d found my daughter adopted into the Nikolaev family. Once I took her back, they’d declare a war at worst and name me an enemy at best.

“*How many families did you have?*” she asked, unaware of the turmoil happening inside me.

I raised my hands. “*I just had one. I lost my hearing when I was almost six. My parents and my sister had to learn ASL at the same time as me*.”

Her eyes lit up, sparking blue. Maybe I was biased, but Skye was the most beautiful girl I had ever met.

“*Branka and Sasha learned to sign too*,” she announced. “*They’re getting better every day.*”

I smiled. “*You like them?*”

She shrugged. “*I do.*”

I wasn’t an expert with children, but she didn’t seem attached to them. Maybe I could tell her I was her mother, beg for forgiveness for abandoning her, and ask her to run with me? *Yeah, that’s dumb.* The Nikolaev family ruled this territory. We’d never escape this street, never mind this state.

Then, as if destiny wanted to prove my point, a dark shadow spread over Skye and me.

Skye’s eyes lifted above my head and a grin stretched across her face. “*Hello, Sasha.*”

Oh, shit.

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FORTY

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DANTE

"How is my favorite sister doing today?" I strode onto the terrace where Reina sat. The last several months had been hard for her recovery. The revelations along the way interlinked the Romero and Leone family in permanent ways.

Her feet dangled off the ledge. She'd done this most days since we rescued her from the clutches of Perez Cortes—sitting out here, hands in her lap, her dull eyes looking out over the horizon.

Her bruises faded, but certain scars remained. Like the one she had from the accident three years ago, when she'd spent weeks in the hospital and my brother had been ready to level the earth. But that one paled compared to the ones that Cortes had given her—visible and invisible ones. The proof was in her screams that woke everyone in Amon's manor in Jolo.

She flicked me a dry look. "As far as I know, I'm your only *half sister*."

Okay, she'd emphasized the *half* part. No big deal.

"How are you dealing with everything?"

She shot me a wry look. "Peachy."

Okay, one-word answers. At this rate, this would be a long conversation. *Fucking not.*

"I… I was a—" The words got stuck in my throat. I kept trying to push them past my lips but my vocal cords refused to work. I couldn't utter the words out loud. Fuck! I really hoped I'd be able to offer her some kind of comfort as someone who'd seen similar horrors, but I was failing miserably. "You're a survivor," I ended up saying. "It takes time to heal."

I would know. It had been five goddamned years for me, and I still wasn't sure where I stood.

"Yeah, so my therapist keeps telling me."

Dr. Freud had been having sessions with Reina since her rescue. The lady *did* take house calls. Damn it, I should have asked for that all along.

"Are the sessions with her helping?"

She shrugged. "I guess so."

"I find that they help me," I admitted.

That got a reaction out of her. Her eyes found mine, the usual spark in them extinguished. Her shoulders were slumped and she looked too thin. Too exhausted.

It didn't sit well with me seeing her like this, but I didn't know how to fix it. The desire for vengeance had been replaced with genuine concern for her health, and worry for Nix who seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth.

"It makes sense that you need therapy," she muttered. *Fucking ouch.*

"I'll let that one slide," I retorted dryly.

"Whatever."

"Anyhow, it helps to talk to someone. Or just let them talk and you listen."

She snorted. "Why is it that I can't imagine *you* listening?"

"Probably because you're too smart for your own good."

"Is that a compliment, brother?"

I grinned. "It sure is."

Silence followed, stretching as the sound of distant waves and a soft breeze drifted through the air.

I looked her over, a pang of guilt piercing my chest for being rash and exposing her to Marchetti for murdering Leone. Not that Amon would let Marchetti judge her. Neither would I. Truthfully, I was surprised my brother didn't kill me when I told him. His injuries probably saved my life.

I just wished I could spare Reina further pain. She didn't need the Omertà judging her. She was still healing, but somehow I knew she'd come out of it stronger. After all, it wasn't just anyone who could take down my father.

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked, not bothering to glance my way.

“I have a question.” I lowered myself next to her, careful to keep my distance. I’d caught her reeling away from Amon, so I had no doubt she’d punch me. “Well, two questions.”

She didn’t react, letting the silence engulf us. It was unsettling how much she looked like Phoenix, aside from her hair color. Sometimes even their mannerisms were identical.

“What happened with Angelo?”

That got a reaction out of her. Her head turned my way and she locked her gaze with mine.

She inhaled a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. “I killed him.”

“Why?”

“He attacked me.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. He showed up drunk, and started talking about Mamma and Phoenix. He thought she was his.”

“He beat you up?”

She swallowed, her delicate neck bobbing. “Yes. And while his hand wrapped around my neck, I reached for his gun and shot him.” I clenched my fists, my knuckles turning white. “I’m not sorry.”

I let out a sardonic breath. “I wouldn’t be either. I just wish I’d gotten to kill him first.” She tilted her head, watching me pensively. “I hope you made it hurt.”

She blinked. “We cut up his body.”

“While still alive?” She shook her head, returning her gaze to the blue sea in the distance. “Too bad,” I grumbled. “It would have been nice to know he suffered.”

“I’ll remember to take requests next time.”

“Touché,” I said. It was the next topic that was the sensitive one. “About your sister…”

Her head whipped my way and her eyes widened. “What about her?”

“Where do you think she’d hide?” It was the question I couldn’t ask earlier due to her violent episodes and everyone keeping Nix’s disappearance a secret, but now that she’d gotten the truth, it was inevitable.

She scoffed. “As if I’d tell you.” Fuck, she was too loyal. “What do you even want with her?”

To marry her. Fuck her. Love her. Not necessarily in that order.

“I just want to talk to her,” I said, lying through my teeth. Her snicker told me she didn’t believe me.

“Well, she doesn’t want to talk to you,” she said, stating the obvious. “You’ll never force her to marry you because of that stupid marriage contract.”

Once I had her, we’d be wed, and I’d charm her into falling in love with me. We had good sexual chemistry. It was a start.

“Who said anything about marriage?”

Reina rolled her eyes and turned her attention to the sea, signaling I wouldn’t be getting any more answers. I’d have to start my search at the beginning.

Then she surprised me. “My turn for a question.”

“Shoot.”

“What are you doing in the Philippines?”

“I hoped Phoenix would be with you,” I told her truthfully. “I knew Amon would eventually snatch you, but I hoped you would have insisted on dragging your sister along.”

Her lips curved into a wry smile. “I wish, but it was difficult to communicate, being that I was drugged and all.” Fair enough. “By the way, Phoenix will fight you every step of the way down that aisle.”

We shall see about that.

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FORTY-ONE

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PHOENIX

I didn't look up from Skye's face as I felt a presence behind me.

A woman fell to her knees next to me, hugging Skye frantically and checking her as if there were a possibility she might be bruised under her perfect little designer dress. Truthfully, there wasn't even a wrinkle in it, and little girls *should* have wrinkles in their dresses.

"Are you okay*?*" she, who I assumed was Branka, signed in slightly unpracticed hand movements.

Sasha lowered to his knees on the other side of his wife, narrowing his eyes on me before he turned them to my daughter, and I watched, mesmerized, as his expression and those frightening pale blue eyes softened. "We talked about the dangers of sneaking away. You nearly gave us a heart attack."

The vise around my heart squeezed, gripping me brutally. *They loved her.* I could see it plain as day. It was the way my sister and I loved each other. How was I going to break them up?

"*I'm fine. Phoenix kept me safe*." Skye gave me a blinding smile and I returned it.

Branka and Sasha faced me. Suddenly, the sun felt heavy and hot as sweat trickled down my spine. I had their full attention, but I refused to look at *him*. Sasha Nikolaev's pale gaze was what nightmares were made of, and I was terrified he'd read the intention in my eyes.

Branka started speaking too fast for me to read her lips, though I caught a *thank you* in between all that ramble.

"*She speaks like me*," Skye explained, signing, and Branka's eyes widened as she looked at me.

“What are the chances?” Branka exclaimed as she signed.

“What a coincidence indeed,” Sasha signed with a sarcastic look in his eyes.

Fuck, he was scary. Inquisitive eyes. Broad shoulders. MMA build.

“*Nice to meet you,*” I signed, then stood up to my full height and forced a smile on my face, meeting both their gazes. “S*he was lost, so we just chatted.*” While I debated how to steal her away from you. “*I’m Phoenix*.”

I valued my life, which meant I’d have to take a moment and rethink my plan.

I turned to look at Skye, every fiber of me rebelling at leaving her. I knew there’d be no snatching her from Sasha Nikolaev though. Even if by some miracle I succeeded, his family would catch up to me before I left town.

I’d need an actual plan.

“*It was nice meeting you, Skye. And I’ll be sure to look into a new version of my iPhone.”*

Branka chuckled, but I couldn’t look away from my daughter, memorizing every line of her face.

Swallowing a lump in my throat, I met Branka’s and Sasha’s eyes and forced another smile.

“You must forgive Skye. She’s fascinated with electronics,” Branka signed and mouthed at the same time. My muscles hurt from the attempt to keep smiling when all I wanted to do was scream at them—at the world—that Skye was mine.

“*She has a point. It’s time for an upgrade*.” I kneeled down to meet her eyes one more time. My nose tingled from the tears I was holding back. “*Be good, Skye*.”

I will see you soon, I thought to myself.

She nodded seriously, and before I could break down, I rose to my feet and gave a terse nod before rushing out of there with a silent sob and tears streaming down my face.

Meghan and Lola Bergman—our fake identifications.

Excitement sizzled under my skin as I stared at the two fake passports. After leaving her behind, I was able to snap a photo of her from a discreet distance. A tech wizard made do with it and adjusted it to fit the necessary guidelines. It ended up serving a dual purpose, because now I could admire it anytime I felt like it.

Hope simmered with every passing minute, bringing me closer to my goal.

I leaned back against the headboard in my room. I was staying in the Hilton, determined not to slum it in case I had to bring Skye here. My bag remained packed, money secured inside the backpack and its secret pockets.

I wanted to be ready when shit hit the fan. When; not if. It was inevitable that it would.

I had followed Branka Nikolaev for the past week, trying to get some sense of her routine. She didn't have one. The woman was all over the place, which had me pulling out my hair. I thought children needed a routine, but apparently I was wrong.

I even started "dating" one of the Nikolaev guards. It took two dates and a reluctant kiss to learn that Sasha and Branka Nikolaev spent a large part of the year in Russia, but usually avoided winter there. My window was closing, and unless I caught a break soon, I'd lose Skye again.

Any moment not spent following Branka or her scary husband, I spent in the park where I first met Skye, hoping she'd make it back there somehow.

She never did.

My fingers wrapped tightly around my new iPhone, a smile spreading on my lips. I even downloaded a few educational apps for children, just in case.

My eyes moved over the hotel room, wishing I had Skye already so we could get going. I bought two airplane tickets with a flexible date so whenever this went down, we'd be on the first flight out of here.

Greece would be our destination. I'd never been, but I didn't know of any Greek mobsters. It'd be safe there. After Greece, who knew.

The world was a big place, and we'd spend the rest of our lives on the run, so we might as well see every corner of it.

But first, I'd have to find a way to get to Skye.

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FORTY-TWO

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PHOENIX

It had been two weeks since my encounter with Skye.

Now that we were in the same city and I'd met her, I yearned to have her by my side. Talk to her. Get to know everything about her.

Branka and Sasha officially adopted Skye three months ago. I was three months too late.

I strolled through the French Quarter, the warm February breeze like a gentle caress on my skin. St. Charles Avenue was busy in preparation for the upcoming Mardi Gras.

The street painters filled the square. The Crescent City boasted, in its style, a variety of cultures and foods. The vibrancy of this city was undeniable as I followed the woman who had my baby.

Casually strolling through the streets, I tailed her for about a block. This was her fifth store, and I was about to feign running into her when I caught a glimpse of blonde hair. My steps faltered and I froze as I watched Tatiana Konstantin—Isla's sister-in-law—being guided out of a car by her guards.

Pressure grew in my chest, and for once, I applied my sister's breathing techniques. I tapped my chest a few times as if that would deflate the bubble that threatened to burst.

The two women hugged tenderly and my heart twisted. I'd been truly cut off from my sister for the first time in our lives, and it was starting to get to me. Still, I couldn't stop now. I'd met my daughter; I was so close to finally having her in my life.

I pretended to study the knickknacks on the shelves while looking back at them in an overhead mirror, making a show of picking up figurines and

holding them high as I inspected the women. I positioned myself so I could read their lips and see their expressions.

“You’re looking good!” Tatiana gushed while I focused on reading her lips. “You’re shopping without me though. Are you avoiding me?”

“No, of course not.” Branka glanced around. “Where’s your husband?”

Tatiana shrugged. “Busy. Something with the Omertà. He wouldn’t say.”

God, I hoped it had nothing to do with me.

“There’s always something going on in the underworld.” Branka wasn’t wrong. Even though Reina and I didn’t grow up with Papà, we knew enough to know there was always a new problem or a new enemy to worry about.

“How are things with my brother Sasha? Still getting your freak on?” Branka turned ten shades of red and suddenly all her attention was on the beads in her hands as if she were seriously going to buy them. “Planning on wearing beads and nothing else, huh?”

“First of all, eww. Second of all, that’s none of your business.”

It didn’t seem to deter Tatiana. She just flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Maybe I’ll do the same with Illias when he gets back. I’ve been in the mood for something kinky.”

Branka let out an exasperated breath. “TMI. Seriously, Tatiana, TMI.”

I cleared my throat and was about to abort my plan and sneak out of the store when a hand on my shoulder stopped me.

I slowly turned around to find Tatiana’s eyes shining like sapphires, her eyebrows meeting her hairline. “Phoenix?” My heart thundered wildly while I stared at her with my target standing right next to her. My identity would definitely be known now. *Fuck.* “What are you doing here?”

I forced a smile and pulled out my phone to type a reply. **I always wanted to visit New Orleans.** It was such a bold-faced lie. **Just sightseeing.**

This was not how I envisioned retrieving my daughter going. Not that I had much of a plan.

Her smile widened. “Oh my gosh, you should have told me.” She glanced at Branka who was watching me with interest. “Branka, this is Phoenix Romero.”

I smiled with reservation, fully expecting a shoe to drop. Tatiana would call her husband, who would in turn call Papà, and I’d get hauled home.

I typed a note. **Where's your husband? Have you talked to Isla?**

"Illias has some urgent business, but he's keeping tight-lipped about it. Isla has been busy." She rolled her eyes. "You probably know what about. She refuses to tell me. Both her and Illias think I'm fragile because I'm pregnant," she complained with an exasperated breath. "I'm dying from boredom here. You have to spend the day with us. Spill some secrets." She nudged Branka's shoulder. "Right?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed Tatiana didn't know anything about my escapade.

"This is the woman who kept Skye safe. Of course," Branka signed while speaking at the same time. She extended her hand. "Nice to meet—"

Her words cut off when two masked men stormed in waving guns.

Black spots clouded my vision as I struggled to draw a breath from the panic crawling up my throat. I didn't think twice before I flattened myself to the ground. My eyes darted around as my heart attempted to pound right out of my chest.

And my thoughts? They bounced all over the place before the world paused for a moment. Commotion around me played in slow motion. Images of my brief encounter with Skye flashed through my mind. Those nine months I carried her in my belly. Dante, and those too-short, happy months. My sister. It was all suspended in the air in the middle of New Orleans while I cowered on the ground of a junk shop.

I gripped my head, making myself as small as possible with my knees pulled up to my chest. I met Branka's and Tatiana's glances, both of them on the ground too, Tatiana holding her belly.

I blinked and focused on dragging air into my seizing lungs, willing my racing pulse to slow down. I needed to see my daughter grow up.

My survival instincts kicked in and I braced myself on a shoulder, lifting my head slightly. I fought the panic and my eyes darted to Tatiana who was watching the whole scene with annoyance flaring in her expression. Like this was just another normal, everyday occurrence.

Branka, on the other hand, watched the two masked men and their chaotic robbery with her mouth wide open.

Then a vibration shook the ground, almost as if the whole police force were storming the store. The blur of dark suits. Glimpses of shiny metal. Before my brain could process what was happening, it was over.

My eyes roamed to find Tatiana and Branka staring at me.

“You okay?” Branka signed while Tatiana stared at me like I had two heads.

I swallowed. “*What happened*?”

Branka signed, but I couldn’t quite grasp what she was saying. Noting my confusion, she mouthed, “It was a robbery.”

“We’re safe now,” Tatiana mimicked the speed of Branka’s speech. “My brothers always come to the rescue.”

She flashed me a soft, reassuring smile, and it felt like a slice through my heart. Maybe it was the knowledge that I’d betray her and her family, my sister, everyone. Or maybe it was the fear that I would fail. Days, weeks, months of trying to remain strong finally caught up to me, and fear threatened to swallow me whole. A tremor started in my hands and moved up my arms; my lungs tightening with every breath I took.

Black spots swam in my visions.

I squeezed my eyes closed, tears escaping through my lashes. I couldn’t keep my strangled gasp behind my lips.

I had to be strong and banish all those feelings out of my chest. I was doing this for my daughter and myself.

A cool hand tapping on my cheek forced my eyes open. Through blurred vision, I met two pairs of pale blue eyes. Black suit. Broad shoulders. Straight lines.

I blinked, convinced they were playing tricks on me. But still they stared back at me.

“It was just a poor attempt at a robbery,” Sasha signed with a bored expression. “Sometimes those happen here, especially around Mardi Gras season.” A breeze touched my cheek despite everyone crowding me. My eyes flickered to the other version of Sasha that seemed somehow older and bigger. “This is my brother Vasili.”

Their gazes fell to me and I looked back at Tatiana. She stood with another man with the same freaky shade of eyes, except this one didn’t wear a suit. He was even more terrifying despite his casual wardrobe—cargo pants and a black T-shirt.

Tatiana closed the distance between us and came down to meet me where I still lay on the floor.

“You’re safe with us.” She was so fucking wrong. Nobody was safe with these men. The Nikolaevs were some of the most feared men in the

United States. “My brothers wouldn’t hurt a fly.” I barely stifled a snort. Everyone in the underworld hurt someone. They were no exception.

“Come home with us. At least until you’re feeling better,” Branka said, speaking slowly.

My mind started working vigorously. It could be a way to get close to Skye. My only chance, considering how well this family protected their own.

I nodded, determination taking shape inside me.

My breaths came out steady. The knot in my chest loosened. My decision was made.

I would betray the devil himself to get my daughter back. Why not the Nikolaevs too?

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FORTY-THREE

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DANTE

"Where are you going to start?" Amon asked while making last-minute arrangements for his honeymoon.

"Fuck if I know," I muttered.

I hated to admit it, but I was jealous of my own brother. He deserved happiness, both Reina and Amon did, yet it was hard to stand by and watch. Not when Phoenix had disappeared without a trace, taking my hopes for our future with her.

Maybe she's scared, my mind whispered. I cringed. For as long as I lived, I would never forget the way she'd looked at me in my office all those years ago. I didn't remember much apart from my vision going dark. When it hit me what I'd done, that I'd let myself black out when she was in my care, there was fear in her eyes and bruises already forming around her neck.

I shook my head and got up from my seat, resuming my pacing. My eyes darted to the monitors Amon had all over the office, where he was using facial recognition to search for Mother, Hiroshi, and Phoenix.

Fuck, these blackouts would have to stop. I couldn't risk hurting her again. Maybe I could pay attention to the signs and then lock myself away until I was back to normal. None of the usual triggers—alcohol or rage—were present that night when it happened with her though. It happened without a single warning sign.

"Maybe start at her Malibu home," Amon suggested from his seat by the monitors.

I thought about it, but it was too obvious a place to hide. Considering I had no other leads, I didn't really have anything to lose though.

I stalked out onto the patio that was connected to Amon's office, flexing my fingers. I needed to cool off. Reina didn't need to see me lashing out, and Amon needed peace to deal with the aftermath of his wife's kidnapping.

I braced my arms against the banister and let my eyes wander over the vast blue sea while my thoughts traveled to the woman with the same crystal blue eyes. For the past five years, I'd felt like something—someone—had been slipping through my fingers. The only time I felt as if I was whole was when *she* was around.

And then there was the worry of her roaming the planet alone and unprotected. What if something happened to her? What if someone tried to take advantage of her?

Steps sounded behind me and I flicked a glance over my shoulder. "What do you need from me?"

I turned, facing him. "Take care of yourself and your wife."

Amon nodded. "And happy hunting to you, brother."

The thrill of the impending chase spread through my veins like adrenaline.

There was no chance I would let her go. I wouldn't stop until Phoenix Romero was mine, and if I had to turn over every single stone and kill every fucking person, I would. I'd find my Nix.

I caught Dr. Freud as I was leaving Amon's compound, just as she was about to enter the vehicle Amon had arranged to get her back to the airport.

The woman had the audacity to roll her eyes when she spotted me.

"It's not very professional to roll your eyes at your patients," I deadpanned.

She let out an exasperated sigh. "You're not my patient right now."

I slid my hands into my pockets and leaned against the car, blocking her way. "I thought you didn't make house calls."

Her lips quirked. "Sometimes I make exceptions."

I tilted my head, smirking. “Well, as the representative for all screwed-up people, we thank you.”

She didn’t let me frazzle her, despite my tall frame blocking her petite one. “You’re welcome. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to catch my flight.”

I chuckled. “Amon’s providing you with a private jet. Trust me, it won’t leave without you.”

She sighed. “Don’t tell me you need another impromptu session?”

“Maybe.”

“I don’t have your file on me.” As if she needed it. She knew it inside out and she was still desperate to figure out the reason behind my blackouts. I crossed my legs, letting my ankle rest against the other, waiting for her to continue. “But I guess we can give this a shot. I must admit, I’m too intrigued.”

“You know what they say, curiosity killed the cat,” I drawled, smirking. “But nonetheless, I appreciate it.”

“So are we doing this here?” she questioned, glancing around. Amon’s guards were stationed far enough away that they couldn’t hear us. At my nod, she said, “Okay, then. Tell me what’s bothering you now.”

“I want to know my diagnosis.”

She tilted her head, studying me. “I thought we went over that already.” My unwavering gaze insisted it wasn’t enough. She swallowed. “Until you deal with it, Dante, your blackouts will continue. Possibly get worse.”

“Sounds serious.”

She shook her head. “For you, maybe not.” Her thoughtful gaze settled on my face and, despite being forced to crane her neck, she saw too much. “For those around you, it could be.”

She struck a nerve there, and judging by her expression, she knew it. “You’re losing me,” I lied.

Her lips lifted. “No, I’m not.” She shifted her bag from one hand to the other. “Deal with your memories, Dante, and you’ll get to the bottom of it all.”

My jaw tightened.

“How am I supposed to deal with it if I don’t remember *anything*?”

She flashed me a sad smile. “You do remember. At this point, you’re the only one holding yourself back.”

A sardonic breath left me. “Go easy on me, why don’t you?”

“You’re not here for easy. If you want *her*, you’ll do this.”

It didn’t escape me how she’d slipped the *her* in there. The good doctor was too smart for her—and my—own good.

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FORTY-FOUR

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PHOENIX

The Nikolaev manor was on the outskirts of New Orleans.

The family, or the eldest brother, owned a hundred acres around it, affording the family privacy and protection and making my plan of kidnapping my daughter seem next to impossible.

The Nikolaevs had a caravan of cars for security. It might as well be a presidential motorcade complete with Secret Service. *Very inconspicuous,* I snickered silently.

I turned to Tatiana, pulling out my phone. **Did they catch the culprits of the robbery?**

She shrugged. “I’m sure. Don’t worry, those men will be dead soon if they aren’t already.”

I winced at how casually she made the comment. Would they kill me with such ease too? Without an ounce of doubt, I knew that they would.

Once the driver parked the car, Tatiana and I slid out. It was unheard of for the Nikolaevs to let a stranger into their home, but Tatiana assured them of my family’s position in the underworld and vouched for me.

Hesitation danced through me. I prayed her husband wasn’t here, but I worried it’d look suspicious if I asked her the question. Instead, I smiled as if everything was peachy while internally shaking with worry.

A light tap on my shoulder had me turning around and meeting Branka’s gaze. “Are you feeling okay?” she signed.

“*Never better,*” I signed, lying through my teeth.

The sun was still high up in the sky. A mild breeze swept down the side of the estate, reaching us where we stood across from the lot housing rows

of luxury cars, from Aston Martins to Mercedes Benzes, a Bugatti along the far end, and… a bright red Jeep.

“It’s Isabella’s. My sister-in-law,” Branka explained, catching me staring. “We stay here when we visit from Russia. It’s nice having a full house.”

Full house.

Living with my girlfriends felt that way. Lively. Happy. Sometimes full of drama. But I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I could understand her wanting to live in the midst of it.

“It helps Skye too,” she continued, and I watched her carefully, hungry to know everything about my daughter. “It means she’s surrounded by her cousins, aunts, and uncles.”

My heart squeezed under my chest at the prospect of seeing my daughter again. Did she remember me?

We made our way toward the back of the house where a large patio covered the area, facing the immaculate lawn that stretched as far as the eye could see. There were boys and girls running around, and my eyes followed them with a smile.

Until I spotted *her*. My baby girl was on the playground with a blond boy with those same pale blue eyes. He looked older than her by at least a few years, but it was hard to tell. It could very well be that he was just larger due to his genes.

The two were glaring at each other as if they were sworn enemies. Then the boy pulled on her pigtail *hard*, making her wince and cry out while he bolted away.

Branka rushed over to her, her scolding glare pinned on the boy who was grinning from a safe distance. A tear rolled down Skye’s cheek, soon followed by many others, making my feet move in her direction.

I joined them and lowered to my knees. “*Did he hurt you*?”

Skye’s blue eyes met mine and she shrugged. “*He’s always pulling on my hair*,” she complained. “*He’s mean*.”

She gave her head a shake, her dark curls escaping from the pigtails sticking to her tearstained cheeks.

“Boys are dumb,” Branka signed and mouthed, while I nodded my head in agreement. “Might as well learn that now.”

Skye studied us with wisdom far beyond her years before her attention darted behind Branka.

“*Sasha too*?” Skye questioned, seeing Sasha approaching behind us and making Branka wince before flashing her husband an innocent smile.

“I see we’re teaching my daughter to rule over the boys, huh?” Sasha’s smile looked like a shark’s grin to me, But the soft expression in his eyes countered it. “Best to just stay away from them. And if any of them give you a hard time—” He shot a glare at the boy, who I assumed was his nephew. “Daddy’s going to whoop their ass.”

Skye smiled through her tears and sadness tugged on my heartstrings. Could I take her away from this?

“*Are you going to whoop Nikola’s ass*?” Skye questioned while Branka attempted to stifle her smile. “*I want you to.*”

“Don’t say ass, Skye,” Branka scolded, then shot her husband a glare. “You too, Sasha.”

Sasha actually bowed and flashed her a big smile. “Your wish is my command.” Then he rose to his full, towering height. “Nikola, get your *butt* over here.” He winked at his wife.

I could feel everyone’s eyes on us while I watched the whole exchange with fascination. The boy sauntered over, his hands tucked in his pockets and his head hanging low.

“I’m going to whoop your ass.” I read Sasha’s lips as he winked at Skye again, signing “ass” and drawing a scolding look from Branka. “Unless you apologize to Skye and start treating her the way a girl should be treated. Gently and with respect.”

Skye and I snickered, and their eyes darted my way. “*Sorry*,” we signed at the same time, and Sasha’s gaze narrowed on me. Almost as if he was seeing something he didn’t like.

He returned his attention to his nephew. “You always protect the family, and Skye is family. She’s your cousin.” Nikola’s expression turned broody and he pursed his lips. “So what’s it gonna be?”

He stomped over to Skye and I stiffened, ready to intervene if he hurt her, but then he pulled her into his arms. Skye’s expression signaled her shock, and she raised her face just as he bent his head and… *Smooch*.

Everyone froze, including the boy. I stared at him. He stared at Skye, who studied him with confusion. Sasha and Branka watched both of them.

And the whole time, one sentence screamed in my mind. *That motherfucking boy just kissed my daughter on her lips.*

His face turned bright red, making his pale blond hair almost appear pink. Then he released her and ran into the house.

A woman with dark hair and soft brown eyes chuckled as she followed him.

“That’s Isabella, Alexei’s sister,” Branka explained. “She’s married to Vasili.” She jutted her chin in the direction of the older, more distinguished version of Sasha and Alexei. Until you looked at the man’s knuckles, ink marring them. “His brother,” she added.

Then the meaning registered and my mouth fell open. *Holy shit!* This family was fucked up.

“Vasili and Isabella aren’t related,” Sasha chimed in, glaring at me at the same time. It was as if he read me like a book, wreaking havoc on my nervous system. This man was more brawn than sophistication, wide shoulders, an aura of danger surrounding him. Self-preservation kicked in and I averted my eyes.

What if he knew everything I was thinking?

A small hand slid into mine and caught my attention. I lowered my gaze to find Skye smiling happily. “*Hello, Phoenix*.”

Okay, it still wasn’t mommy, but it was better than “lady.”

With trembling hands, I signed back, “*Hello, Skye, it’s so nice to see you again*.”

She surprised me by throwing herself into my arms and wrapping her arms around my neck, making me almost tumble backward on my heels.

I held my breath for a long, drawn-out moment, letting the emotions wash over me. *Five years!* I had been waiting for this for five whole years. Tears burned in the backs of my eyes and my lips trembled as I returned the hug, enveloping her little body in my embrace.

Aware of a few stares, I slowly rose to my feet and faced everyone.

Isabella came rushing outside with her son in tow. Vasili joined them, ruffling his son’s hair and uttering words I couldn’t read on his lips.

They came up to me, Skye’s hand still in mine. I couldn’t find it in me to release it. Sasha’s expression locked on me and darkened, and my stomach dipped.

Isabella lowered her eyes to her son and offered an encouraging smile.

“Sorry,” he grumbled, then went to leave, but his mother stopped him.

“Try that again, buddy.”

Nikola let out a frustrated breath. “Sorry for pulling on your hair,” he signed while moving his lips slowly, and I couldn’t help but be impressed. Then he looked down at his feet, before meeting her gaze as he added, “And for kissing you.”

He didn’t look sorry at all, and judging by his parents’ expression, they picked up on the sentiment too. He readied to leave but his uncle stopped him. “Not so fast, buddy.”

I watched the exchange with fascination. Scenarios like this never took place in our household growing up. My sister and I were always on the same wavelength, and we didn’t have any cousins to argue with, both our parents being only children. Judging by the atmosphere, the Nikolaev family was used to it.

Sasha came to Skye’s other side and got down on one knee. “Is that satisfactory, princess, or do you still want me to whoop his ass?”

Two breaths of silence passed before Skye smiled sweetly. “*I forgive him.*”

Nikola left to make his way across the yard and Skye followed him. “And so the cycle continues,” Branka stated, amused. “These two will either be best friends or—”

She gave a pointed look to Isabella who just rolled her eyes and turned to me with a warm smile as she extended her hand.

“Hello, I’m Isabella,” she said slowly and with a warm smile on her lips.

Tatiana joined in, speaking too fast for me to follow. I observed the three women chatting vividly and laughing, keeping a polite smile on my face even though I felt slightly left out. My gaze roved the lawn until it landed on Skye, and I caught that same sense of estrangement—or maybe loneliness—flicker across her expression.

I tilted my head, excusing myself, and made my way across the lawn. Skye’s eyes met mine and she ran over to me.

I sat in a crisscross position, enjoying the feel of the cool grass under my legs, and watched as she took the spot next to me. “*Do you feel like that too, Phoenix?*”

“*Left out?*” She nodded. “*Sometimes*,” I admitted. “*It helps if I people-watch*.”

Her delicate eyebrows scrunched as she watched me with those big sapphire-blue eyes. “*What’s that?*”

"*It's just a way to observe. Studying people's expressions. Sometimes they say more with their eyes than their lips*."

"*Like when Branka is mad and her lips go really thin? Or when Sasha is mad and his vein pulses right there?*"

She pointed to my temple and I chuckled. "*Exactly. See, you're doing it already*."

She nodded somberly. "*I don't like it all the time. Do you*?"

"*In the beginning—*" When she gave me a confused look, I added, "*When I was a little girl, I didn't like it. My mamma said I was special, but I didn't want to be. I wanted to be like everyone else. Like my sister."*

Her eyes widened. "*You have a sister?*" I nodded. "*She's not like you?*"

"*No, but she's the best friend I've ever had. She's the one who turned it into a game. The two of us would watch people and guess what their eyes were saying versus their lips.*"

She let out a heavy sigh. "*I wish I had a sister. Or a mommy who was like me*." My chest pulsed with an ache at seeing the pain on her face. Maybe she wasn't as happy with Branka and Sasha as I'd thought.

"*You don't like it here with Branka and Sasha?*" I asked with trembling fingers.

Her eyes locked on me. "*They're okay, but they're not like me*."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. Maybe there was a chance for me to get my daughter back. Maybe she'd be happier with me. So many thoughts danced through my mind at the possibilities.

A shadow fell over me and I slowly looked up to find Sasha hovering over us, watching me suspiciously.

I flashed him a smile and waved my hand.

"What are you two talking about?" he inquired, watching Skye with a soft expression.

"*Just mommies and daddies*," Skye answered, probably sensing it'd be wrong to admit to him what she'd really said.

Tatiana, Isabella, and Branka came to grab me and pull me into their conversation. The armed robbery seemed to be a distant history despite the fact that it had only happened a few hours ago. These people were unlike any family I had ever witnessed. Badass. And terrifying.

For the next two hours, I was part of the Nikolaev family. They talked and laughed as I watched their interactions, and through it all, I knew my betrayal would seal my fate.

After hours of Isabella's attempts at cooking and burning every dish she put in the oven, her husband finally put his foot down and ushered us all out of the house and into a caravan of vehicles. I couldn't decide whether we looked like a funeral procession or a presidential escort.

I would have ditched the *party* a long time ago, but I wanted to stay around Skye for as long as possible. So when the Nikolaevs insisted I go out to dinner with them, I agreed.

Black-and-white pictures of the French Quarter hung on the walls. The round tables were covered with dark blue tablecloths. A mahogany bar ran across one wall and some of the men headed straight for it.

Tatiana ushered me, Branka, Isabella, and Aurora—Alexei's wife who was an FBI agent, a fact I was steadily ignoring—to the large booths, and I hung back so I could take the last seat. I hated feeling cornered.

The children took the table closest to us. The chandeliers, dating a few centuries back and looking better suited to a castle, cast a warm glow over everyone. It was the type of restaurant that was both romantic and casual.

The commotion and chaotic atmosphere made me feel like a fish out of water.

Warm air brushed my skin as the door opened and a man dressed in a striped three-piece suit strode in, taking up a booth closest to the emergency exit.

I glanced down at my yellow T-shirt dress and white Chucks. It wasn't exactly appropriate for dinner, and it only registered now that everyone else was dressed for a black-tie dinner.

"What's wrong?" Tatiana asked, noting my expression.

I reached for my phone and typed. **I'm underdressed**.

She read the message and chuckled. "You're with us. We make the rules."

The waitress showed up and placed our drinks down. She said something, watching the Nikolaev ladies who were clearly regulars here, before she turned to me. "What can I get you?"

"*Just water, please*," I signed as Branka translated.

Tatiana sighed. “Now I know you and the girls don’t drink water when you go out,” she teased. “Isla has shared some pretty juicy stories.”

I blushed, then shook my head. “*I need to eat before I start drinking*.”

“Smart,” Isabella commended. “It’s too late for me, but don’t let that woman corrupt you.”

Tatiana snickered, sipping on her own water. Except we all knew why she was drinking water. She was far from subtle about her pregnancy, and was obviously over the moon about it.

“I’m an angel,” Tatiana announced. “Let’s just blame Aurora.”

She rolled her eyes. “How did I get sucked into this?”

The beautiful woman vibrated with self-confidence, which was in line with her position as a federal agent, I supposed. I couldn’t help but wonder how someone like her ever crossed paths with the likes of her husband—a mobster who didn’t seem to have a single inch of his skin left unmarked by tattoos. They were like night and day. They should have never found themselves in the same time zone.

So, I voiced my curiosity. “*How does an FBI agent end up married to a…*” I paused, thinking of the best word to use. “*…mobster, and make it work*?”

Branka translated for me again and I shot her a grateful glance.

Aurora shrugged, chuckling, and her eyes found her husband’s across the restaurant. If I stepped between them, I’d burst into flames. They looked at each other with so much love that it made my chest hurt.

“You figure out your priorities. Family always comes first, and he’s mine,” she finally answered, her gaze still on her husband.

“Are you close with your family?” Branka asked me while signing as best she could.

I nodded. “*Yes, my sister and I are very close. My friends, too. Not sure where I’d be without them.*”

She smiled, but I recognized torment and pain hidden beneath the surface, making me wonder what her story was. “That’s important. Good friends and family.”

The words rang true. Reina had always been there for me, through thick and thin. My friends too. When we didn’t have Papà or when Grandma was wrapped up in her new husband, we relied on each other.

My eyes flicked to the table next to me where Skye and Nikola continued their push and pull. I smiled softly.

“You never told me how Skye lost her hearing,” Tatiana asked Branka curiously.

“It’s Pendred syndrome,” Branka explained. “A genetic disorder that causes early hearing loss in children.”

It was something Skye had inherited from me. I’d suspected it, but numbness flooded me anyway. As a mother, I wished she would have been spared, but in my eyes, she was still the most perfect little girl in the world. I loved all her perfect imperfections.

“*What made you adopt?*” I asked, meeting her gaze and steering the subject away from genetics. “*Skye said you learned ASL for her*.”

Branka’s eyes flashed with momentary sadness, but then her gaze found Skye and she smiled softly. “I can’t have children, and the moment I saw her…” Guilt pierced through my chest, and I knew it’d stay with me for the rest of my life. “She felt like she belonged to us.” I was once again impressed by her ability to sign as she spoke. I wondered if she’d started learning the moment she’d been informed of Skye’s needs.

Unease danced beneath my skin to nervous tunes and I shifted in my seat. “*Did you…*” I swallowed a lump in my throat. “*Did you meet her mother?*”

Branka shook her head. “No.”

“*Aren’t you scared her birth parents might show up and want her back*?” I must have been a glutton for punishment.

Sasha appeared out of nowhere, placing a beer on the table for his wife and handing me a water.

“I’ll put anyone six feet under before I let them take her,” he signed clearly.

Bu-bum. Bu-bum. The beat of my heart resonated beneath a sheen of cold sweat. I knew appealing to their reason was out of the question now.

He returned to his brothers as the women started chatting among themselves.

In discomfort, my gaze darted away as the only guest in the restaurant who seemed not to be part of the Nikolaev party stood up and started toward the back of the restaurant where the emergency exit and restrooms were.

A tickle played in my awareness when I noticed the black suitcase left behind.

One moment the air was still, and the next… *Boom!*

We were thrown to the floor under a hail of shattered glass and debris. A lungful of air escaped me as the earth shifted under my feet. My eyes shot to the children and I reached out blindly, pulling them down onto the floor. Nikola's body was already on top of Skye protectively. I covered both of theirs as best I could as more glass shattered over my back, slicing into my flesh.

The danger in the air was so thick I could taste it on my tongue. My daughter's blue eyes—wide and petrified—darted around in confusion, and I moved my lips, mouthing words of reassurance while the chaos played on.

Then stillness fell and I glanced around. The Nikolaev men were all checking in on their families. Tatiana was crying. Alexei was cradling his wife and baby. Vasili hunched over, lifting me by the elbow. Dazed, I stared as he checked over Nikola and Skye.

"Thank you," he mouthed as if I had done something when it was his son who took it upon himself to cover Skye's body first. "Branka's injured. Keep an eye on Skye." I read his lips as he lifted Nikola off the floor, then huddled him to his mamma.

My gaze flicked to Branka and she was indeed hurt, a large piece of glass pierced through her shoulder. My eyes darted around the room, filled with broken glass and disorder. Blood. Smoke. And the silence in my head while opportunity whispered. The shift in the air washed over me, and I knew this was my only chance.

With everyone's eyes on the babies and injured women, I looked at Skye, her chubby cheeks smeared with tears and filth. I ran a thumb across her cheek gently.

"*Are you hurt?*" She shook her head, but her grip on my dress tightened and she huddled closer to me. "*You're safe.*" I pulled her closer to me.

"*I'm really scared*," she signed, her little hands trembling violently. My eyes darted around the room. Isabella was tending to the wounded. Branka seemed to have been hit the worst, a gush of blood soaking through her clothes and dripping down her fingers.

I swallowed. "*I can keep you safe*," I signed, my resolve hardening. "*But we'll have to go to my hotel room. Away from all this.*"

"*Not home?*" she questioned.

"*It might not be safe to go home now. You can come with me if you want*."

I waited for an answer with bated breath, knowing that her next words would change our lives forever.

One way or another.

"*I want to go with you*."

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FORTY-FIVE

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PHOENIX

Among the commotion, I snuck Skye toward the bathrooms and took the back exit out onto the street. Fire engines approached, and I bolted the opposite way, thanking all the saints that my hotel was in that direction. I'd been in New Orleans long enough to learn the layout of the city and how to navigate it expertly.

I was sweating by the time we got to my hotel room.

Once inside, I locked the door and lowered Skye onto the bed. My arms shook from the exertion, but I hadn't dared to put her down on the entire way here for fear that she'd slow us down.

I rushed to the bathroom and came back with a wet rag, wiping Skye's face, hands, and knees. "*It's your blood*," she pointed out.

I glanced at myself. I was a mess, while her clothes were fairly intact, albeit a bit wrinkly. "*I'm going to get cleaned up and changed. Okay*?" She nodded and I reached for the remote, turning the television on and then flipping to the children's channel.

With her attention on the television, I made my way to the bathroom, got cleaned up, and changed into clean clothes. Jeans. White T-shirt. Converse. I stared at my reflection in the mirror, amazed at how put together I appeared, none of the turmoil going on inside me showing.

Shaking myself off, I made my way back into the room, noting Skye's attention still on the cartoons. I rushed to my suitcase, stuffing everything into it, then grabbed my backpack with the money.

I turned to the bed, finding Skye watching me with a keen eye. "*What are you doing?*"

It was now or never. I knew it was wrong, but there was no chance Sasha Nikolaev would have let me have her. Birth mother or not. Wrong or right.

Inhaling a deep breath, I made up my mind.

"*I have to tell you something important.*" She blinked, eyes still wide from the shock of the explosion, and I prayed my next words wouldn't do more harm than good. "*I'm your mommy."*

Her little mouth opened and closed. She lifted her hands and then lowered them again.

"*Five years ago, I had a baby. I had you."* Anguish tore at my chest, cutting all my emotions down to one: fear of rejection. "*You're my baby, Skye. I've been searching all over for you*."

"*You're my mommy?*"

I nodded, swallowing the growing lump in my throat. She still seemed skeptical.

"*We have the same black hair. You look just like me when I was your age, sweetheart. Most importantly, we both lost our hearing for the same reason. I'm so sorry. I think you're deaf because of me."* I didn't bother stopping the tear that slid down my cheek.

"*That's okay. You didn't mean to do it."* This child. My heart expanded. "*Why are you packing*?" she finally asked as I continued to shove clothes into my bag.

"*I have to leave, and I want to take you with me, but only if you want to go.*" I inhaled a steadying breath. "*I love you. Do you want to come with me?"*

One long moment. Two heartbeats. Three shuddering breaths.

She threw herself into my arms and I caught her, pressing her to my chest. Another lone tear rolled down my cheek and was soon followed by a flood of them. She lifted her head, my trembling lips finding her forehead.

"*I want to come with you*."

My unsteady smile. Her shimmering eyes.

"*Ready?*" I asked her. She looked up at me with a serious expression that I couldn't read and doubt crept into my mind. Was I making a mistake? I couldn't even read my own daughter's emotions. I immediately banished the self-doubt from my mind. "*You're safe,*" I told her.

That much was true. If the Nikolaevs found us, she would be safe. I was the one they'd eliminate, but I couldn't tell her that.

“*Are you really my mommy*?” It was as if she was scared she’d wake up and learn it was all a dream.

“*I am*.”

“*Where were you*?”

The question struck a nerve. Didn’t I ask Dante the same question? And suddenly I knew there’d never be a good enough answer. Not from me, and certainly not from him. Not for this little girl who had gone through four families and suffered loneliness I couldn’t even begin to fathom.

The mattress dipped under my weight as I sat on the bed and faced her.

“*I was too scared*,” I admitted. “*My grandma claimed I was too young to be a mom, and she took you from me. I knew the right thing to do was to keep you with me though. I should have fought tooth and nail for you. I’m sorry I failed you*.”

“*But now you want me?*” Her little voice cracked. No child should ever feel unwanted. The fact that it had happened to my own made my chest twist with pain and fury. I’d failed her, but I never would again.

“*I’ve always wanted you.*” I feared the unknown and our future. I was terrified about not getting things right, but for the first time in five years, I felt like something had gone right. “*I’m finally brave enough to fight for it. For you. If you’ll let me.*”

“*What about Branka and Sasha*?”

My heart tripped at her question. I didn’t have a good answer for her, and I didn’t want to lie to her.

I met her gaze. “*I hope once we are settled, I can reach out to them and explain*.” It was the least I could do, but I’d ensure we were a safe distance away and that they couldn’t track me down. Sasha’s threat rang in my ears, but I shook away the thought.

“*Will I be able to see them again*?”

My chest twisted. “*I don’t know, baby. I hope so, but I can’t promise you that.*”

Skye frowned. “*Because they’ll be mad at you*?”

She was perceptive for her age. Maybe one day she’d even rule the world. “*Yes, but only because they love you*.”

Throwing her hands up, she signed, “*First I didn’t have anyone who loved me, and now I have too many people who love me.*”

I smiled shakily. “*You can never have too many people who love you, sweetheart. We all loved you all along. We just had to find our way to you*.”

That made her smile real big. “*Are you ready to explore the world with me*?”

“*Let’s go*.”

I purchased a one-way ticket to New York City from Louis Armstrong Airport under Skye’s and my real names, hoping it’d lead the Nikolaev’s in the wrong direction. I hoped it would give us enough time to drive to Baton Rouge Airport and board flights to Greece under our assumed names before they suspected my scheme.

My heart was beating in my throat when I handed the passports to the TSA officer less than two hours later. The woman barely glanced at the photos.

The security guards also didn’t pay us any mind as we found our way to the gate.

I sat us in the closest seats to the gate, our runaway money secured on the seat next to me. I kept checking our surroundings nervously, but nobody showed up. I fought the tears, almost tasting our freedom. Happiness. Love. Adventure. It all awaited us in our new life.

“*Are you scared… Mommy?*” I lost my fight with the tears and pulled her into a hug. Even if death found me, it would all be worth it now.

“*A little bit*,” I admitted. “*I’ve never done anything like this before.*”

“*You’re not going to leave me alone, right?*” The uncertainty and fear in her eyes gutted me. I slid onto my knees and wrapped my arms around her slim body, still wearing her dress that Tatiana picked out for her—a Dolce & Gabbana white dress with black bows. We looked odd together—me wearing a casual outfit and her wearing D&G.

“*Wherever I go, you go*,” I signed, making a somber vow. “*And wherever you go, I go*. *You will never be alone again.*”

“*Promise?*”

“*Cross my heart*,” I signed.

A stranger in a hoodie took the available seat next to us, his eyes glued to the device in his hands. My eyes darted around the waiting area with

dozens of empty seats, wondering why he'd sit next to us. But the man was so focused on his screen he probably wasn't paying attention to us at all.

I returned my attention to my daughter. "*Want to know what our first stop is?*" She nodded eagerly. "*Athens, Greece. We'll visit the Temple of Poseidon, god of the sea. Maybe we'll even go for a swim if it's warm enough. What do you say*?"

Her face fell. "*I can't swim.*"

"*Well, what are moms for? I'll teach you. Maybe we'll even run into a few mermaids*."

Her eyes flickered with interest. "*Can we get mermaid tails?*"

"*Hmmm, I don't know that humans can actually grow one.*"

She threw her head back and laughed, the sight making my heart warm in my chest. "*It's like a toy*."

"*Oh, in that case, yes*."

Her eyes lit up. "*And flippers?*" She was giving me those big blue eyes that I just couldn't resist.

"*Of course*."

She smiled real big. "*And a mask?*"

I couldn't hold back my laughter. She was already playing me like a fiddle. "*Anything you want, baby*." Then, just to ensure she didn't take it literally, I added, "*Within reason*."

A movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention, and for a flicker of a second, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I watched in horror as the man in a hoodie ran away with the backpack that held most of my money, his attention definitely not on his device anymore. My reaction stalled, but I eventually jumped to my feet, my throat vibrating with the sound of my despair.

I made it two steps, fully intent to go after him, when I froze. I couldn't leave Skye alone.

Going to the police was out of the question. They'd delay our flight and possibly re-examine our travel documents. Not to mention the threat of the Nikolaevs getting to us would be magnified.

My eyes fell to my daughter, then back to the rapidly disappearing man. I fell to my knees, my palms covering my face. That was the bulk of our money. *Our security.*

I tried to breathe, tried not to lose my shit in the middle of the airport, when a small hand came to rest on my arm.

I lifted my head and met my daughter's troubled gaze. This wasn't a promising beginning to our adventure.

Pushing my frustration and despair down, I swallowed and forced a smile on. "*Everything will be okay,*" I assured her.

I was beyond stupid to leave that backpack sitting carelessly like that. It served me right. If only Skye wasn't the one who would have to bear the brunt of my stupidity!

I'd have to figure something else out.

It wasn't until we boarded the plane and were in the air that I was finally able to breathe. It was only my second time flying commercial, and I knew having Skye with me would make it an unforgettable experience.

It was exactly five minutes before Skye dozed off. I, on the other hand, barely got any sleep in the hours that it took the plane to reach Athens. Worry about our lack of funds now and getting hunted by the Nikolaevs had taken root. I had the whole plan laid out but had never accounted for a lack of money. God, what would we do?

But as a little body snuggled farther into me, I found it hard to regret my choices.

I covered her up with the airline blanket while keeping an eye on the passengers around us—not that I expected to run into anyone from the underworld on a commercial flight to Greece. I flicked a glance at my purse, ensuring once again that it was zipped up and attached to my leg.

I was down to forty thousand dollars in cash. I could make do with what I had, but it would eventually run out. I knew that. So I would need to be frugal and find a job to support us. At least until I was twenty-five and could come into the rest of my inheritance.

As Skye slept, I connected to the internet and browsed accommodation options in Athens.

Money wasn't something I'd ever had to worry about before. Yes, Grandma put us on a budget, but there was always the knowledge in the back of our minds that we would always be taken care of. I would have to get us home.

Except, if I did that now, I'd be sentencing my family and friends to death. The best-case scenario was that they'd end up being targets themselves.

I couldn't do *that* either.

By the time we landed, I'd found a small, out-of-the-way bed-and-breakfast. Since I didn't have a credit card to book online, I jotted down the address and prayed they'd have a room available for us when we got there.

This would be our life, I thought to myself as I rubbed Skye's back. I was finally with my daughter. It was up to me to make the best of it. For her, I was willing to do anything.

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FORTY-SIX

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DANTE

Π*ίσω έχει η αχλάδα την ουρά. Písō échei ē achláda tēn ourá*. Man plans, God laughs.

He was certainly laughing at me.

I'd been scouring the world for Phoenix and coming up empty, until I got a tip from Marchetti who had passed on a tip from Lykos Costello. He had spotted a woman resembling Phoenix Romero in Greece. It was a long shot, but without any other leads, I followed it.

So here I was in Athens, staying at the Hotel Grande Bretagne.

Lykos Costello ruled the Greek mafia with strategy and ruthlessness. He made all the right moves. He worked himself up through the ranks, married the perfect girl, gained all the right connections, and threw the most lavish parties.

No one could get close to him. Not that I wanted to.

It was the reason I hadn't reached out to him since arriving in Greece. A debt to the Greek mobster wasn't exactly on my agenda. So, I kept my distance, but his men were constantly on my tail, which made combing the streets of Athens difficult.

"Boss." Cesar's gruff voice came from behind me. I had hacked into several of the surveillance systems in the city, allowing me to monitor streets from the hotel room. "I checked the databases of every hotel. The Romero girl isn't here." I craned my neck, catching a glimpse of my longtime bodyguard over my shoulder. "And Costello called again."

I rolled my eyes. "Why do you keep answering his calls?"

"Trying to keep your ass alive," he grumbled. "Why can't you just visit the man, tell him why you're here, and get it over with?" I flicked Cesar an

annoyed look. His level of persistence had a habit of annoying me. “It’s not like the two of us can fight his entire organization while in his territory.”

“If you’re so scared, go home.”

Cesar threw me a suspicious glance. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

I actually was. His constant words of caution were annoying as fuck. It was like having a nagging babysitter with a conscience following me around.

“I might need you to take care of stuff back in Trieste. The property needs some repairs. That should be peaceful enough for you.”

“Let me guess, you’ll continue ignoring Costello.” He snickered, staring out the window at Acropolis. “And fuck you. I’m not your maintenance man.”

“You’re right. You’re worse.”

“You mean I’m constantly saving your ass.”

“You must be really bored,” I declared, my tone somber. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be tempting me to shoot you.”

He didn’t seem affected one bit. “At least I’d get sick days then.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are we on this shit again? I told you before, Cesar. If you’re sick, be sick and stay in bed. I don’t give a fuck.”

He snorted. “So you can get yourself shot? No, thank you.”

“You’re right. You’re—”

My cell rang, cutting off our bickering. It was Amon.

“What’ve you got?” I answered, hoping he had information on Phoenix.

“You’re still in Greece?”

“Yes.”

“Phoenix is in Athens.”

Hope shot through me and I leaned against the desk to steady myself, my knees suddenly weak. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, Reina saw her.” Doubt crept into me. My half sister was healing, but she wasn’t exactly completely recovered. At least not mentally. That could take years—I knew better than anybody—and her worry for Phoenix was her breaking point.

“Are you sure?” I questioned again, excitement in my voice. Could it truly be that I was so close? “I’ve been here for days and there’s been no trace of her. And it hasn’t helped that fucking Lykos’s men have been shadowing me like damn bloodhounds.”

“She’s certain of what she saw.”

“Fucking Lykos and his men,” I muttered. If they weren’t constantly hounding me, maybe I would have found her already. This was my confirmation she was here, and there was no chance in hell I’d leave now.

“You could have just told him you were coming and stayed at his place.” Amon’s reprimanding voice didn’t escape me. “It would have saved you time and energy. Instead, you were a stubborn ass and sneaked into the country like a thief in the night.”

I didn’t exactly sneak in, but that was purely semantics. When in someone else’s territory, it was customary to meet with them first. However, I had no time to waste on bullshit and customs.

“I don’t want to be wrapped up in his problems.” The man had kids and no wife to take care of them. His life sounded chaotic.

I could sense Amon’s frustration over the line. “What problems?”

“Dunno. We all have problems. I doubt he’s an exception. Besides, I didn’t want his little kids running around, annoying me.”

Children just weren’t my thing.

Amon sighed heavily, likely finished with this conversation. “Anyhow, there’s one thing you should be aware of.”

“What?”

“Reina swears the woman had red hair and a little girl with her.”

“Huh?” Why would she have a child with her?

“A girl, Dante,” Amon said, exasperated. “If it was Phoenix, she had a little girl with her, so make sure you add that to your search profile.”

“I don’t care for redheads.” Of all the things in my mind, I didn’t know why I uttered that one. “A child? She better not have gotten married.” Anger crept beneath my skin, slow and searing. *Deadly.* “She’ll be a widow faster than she can say *bang*.”

I had to swallow the burning rage I felt at the mere thought of another man touching her. Kissing her. The beast inside me pounded his chest, eager for bloodshed.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. The last thing we need is you making a mess here. Your mission is simple: find Phoenix and get out. Keep it clean, brother.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to think? Phoenix with a little girl?”

“Think about finding her.”

His voice was distorted by the emotion rushing through me, drumming in my veins and ringing in my ears.

“I’m going to murder—”

I didn’t get to finish my statement. “You know, maybe you should worry about me murdering your crazy ass. She’s my half sister after all.”

Images of her body writhing while some bastard touched her toyed with my sanity. She was mine and mine alone.

Red crept into my vision, drenching Cesar in it. He still stood there, watching me like I was losing my mind. Too fucking late.

“She’d better not be living with a man either,” I deadpanned.

“I swear, Dante. Your obsession with Phoenix worries me.”

I scoffed. “Well, aren’t you the pot calling the kettle black.”

A heartbeat of silence passed before Amon said, “Remember when you said she looked familiar to you?” I hummed my answer while my dreams centering around a faceless woman rushed to mind. “Ever figure it out?”

“No, but I will. And she’s going to help me.”

I sensed that Phoenix was the key to all my answers.

“Don’t you fucking dare hurt Phoenix when you find her.” Amon’s threat rubbed me the wrong way.

“I don’t beat women.” My tone was indignant, pissed off that he’d even insinuate such a thing. “I’m not Father.”

But the moment the words left my mouth, I recalled my hand on Phoenix’s throat. My fingerprints on her pale skin. The fear in her eyes.

I’d have to ensure I was never around her during my blackouts. I’d never forgive myself if I hurt her.

“I know you’d never hit a woman. It’s your obsessive nature I’m worried about. It’s obvious she’d prefer to keep to herself.”

“No, she wouldn’t prefer that. She wants to be my wife.” Cesar’s scoff didn’t escape me, and I shot him a glare. “She’s just stubborn and refuses to admit it.”

I had to believe that truth. There was *something* between us. I knew it. I felt it.

“If you say so.” Amon’s tone told me he didn’t believe it.

“Do you think she’s living with a man?” I questioned, fixated on any fucker of the opposite gender being anywhere near her.

“How in the fuck should I know?”

“Well, you’re her brother now,” I grumbled. “Shouldn’t you know what she’s doing?” After all, he was the head of the Romero family now. “Whatever man she might be living with, I’ll cut his balls off.”

And I’d make her watch so she’d know never to bother with another man.

“Since when are you such a chauvinist?”

I let out a dark laugh. Amon had seen my crazy, but it’d be nothing compared to the blood trail I’d leave behind when it came to Phoenix if the need should arise.

“Never mind me and my ways. Anything about Hiroshi?”

“No, nothing.”

“Maybe he’s dead already?”

“I doubt it. Hiroshi is a sneaky bastard and death won’t find him by accident.” I agreed with my brother. “He’ll have to be outsmarted.”

“More like he’s been stabbing everyone in the back, starting with your ojīsan.”

“And there’s that. It just pisses me off that I didn’t see it sooner.” I had no doubt. “What’s your plan now?” he asked.

“I’m not leaving Greece till I find Phoenix. I’ve never been the giving-up type, and I certainly won’t start being one now.” I’d waited patiently enough for the past three years. It was time to make Nix my wife and finalize this deal. “How is my newfound sister doing?”

It was best we changed the subject because if Amon got an inkling of my wedding plans to Nix, I was sure he’d try and put a stop to it.

“Better.”

“That’s good. Being a Leone really didn’t serve her well, did it?” It didn’t serve any of us. Not Amon. Not me. Not Hana, Amon’s mother. And certainly not my biological mother. “No matter though, she was a Leone for a hot second before you snatched her back to the Romero side.”

“She’s still your half sister,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but I get the sense she sees Father when she looks at me.” It would be hard not to. I was the spitting image of him. Just as the woman who birthed me predicted. Devil reincarnate.

“If she does, she’s never said it. Besides, once she gets to know you, she’ll see you’re nothing like him.”

“Maybe if she’s still on drugs. If they’re out of her system, she’d have to be blind not to see.”

Not to mention once I dragged Phoenix, her precious sister, down the aisle, Reina would want to murder me.

“We all resemble our parents in one way or another,” Amon pointed out. “If she’s accepted me and forgiven me for all the shit I’ve put her through, I know she won’t hold who your father is against you.”

There was one main difference. “The girl’s head over heels for you. She’d forgive you for burning down the world.” And everyone in it. But not Phoenix. She’d be the first to sentence me to death row.

“Angelo is Reina’s biological father too, and she knows to hold it against you is to hold it against herself. Trust me, she’s not seeing Father when she sees you, and if she does, it won’t last.”

“Yeah, maybe.” There was no sense in rehashing this over and over again. I had my woman to find. “Maybe I’ll kidnap Phoenix and marry her like you did Reina so we won’t have a choice but to be a family.”

It was a sound plan if you asked me.

“That won’t make Reina like you more. If anything, it’ll piss her off. And tone your humor down. It might scare Phoenix.”

“Pfft. Women crave my comedy.”

“In your dreams.”

“There too, but mostly in reality.”

“Well, this woman probably doesn’t.” Why did he have to rain on my parade?

“She’ll have to tell me that herself. But if it makes you feel better, I promise to handle Phoenix gently.” *With my hands exploring every inch and curve of her body.*

“I honestly can’t wait until she puts you in your place. Now stop whining and find her so my wife can be happy.”

I rolled my eyes despite the fact he couldn’t see me. “You’re no fun since I learned you’re a Romero. Maybe that’s why Phoenix evades me, because she thinks like you.”

After all, a Romero’s brain worked differently from a Leone’s. They seemed to be more logical, while we were more… impulsive.

“Let me know if you learn anything. I have to go.”

I glanced at the screen, the call ending abruptly. “He needs to get his priorities straight,” I muttered under my breath, then met Cesar’s narrowed gaze. “What?”

“That’s exactly what I’m asking,” he grumbled. “What?”

Maybe Amon was right and I should use the men at Lykos’s disposal so I could get my hands on Phoenix and take her home. The sooner, the better.

“I need you to go back to Trieste.”

“Not this again. I told you—”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re not my maintenance man. This is different. Find a priest and put him on standby. If he’s not available when I need him, it will be his head.”

“Jesus, you won’t let the girl breathe, will you?”

I grinned. “We’ll say our ‘I dos’ and I’ll slip my ring on her finger. I’m not giving her a chance to slip away from me again.” Clearly he didn’t seem sure about my brilliant plan. “And arrange a meeting with Lykos Costello for tomorrow.”

Cesar’s shoulders relaxed. “Fucking finally.”

I’d get the Greek mobster’s help, and a promise he’d turn a blind eye.

Because heads would roll if I found Phoenix with another man.

The Greek mobster set the time and place to meet.

To my surprise, he didn’t choose his compound. I took it as a good sign that he didn’t want me dead. It was easier to eliminate your enemy in your own home, away from prying eyes. Instead, Lykos picked a very public place.

A kafenerio, a traditional Greek café, in the middle of Athens.

Cesar flew back to Trieste yesterday, taking his annoying comments with him. Still inside my hotel room at Hotel Grande Bretagne, I replied with my confirmation and put on a suit, thoughts of Phoenix never leaving my mind.

About an hour later, the two of us sat at the restaurant overlooking the hillside shops and building architecture of old Athens. Lykos was already there when I arrived, sipping on his coffee.

“You’re late,” he pointed out as I took my seat.

“You said three o’clock,” I retorted dryly.

“It’s three oh five. You Italians are always late.”

I rolled my eyes. “You Greeks are too serious about your coffee and siesta.”

The waitress appeared with a coffee for me, not even bothering to take my order. Lykos must be a regular here.

“So, to what do I owe this meeting?” He didn’t waste any time.

“I need you to tell your men to back the fuck off.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m no threat and you know that. You should assign them more important matters.”

His brow furrowed in clear bemusement. “Thank you for your concern, but my men are doing just fine as they are.”

I shrugged. “Suit yourself, then. It’s your loss.”

His lips curved into a sarcastic smile. “Look at you being all considerate after avoiding me for weeks.”

“I’ve been busy.” I adjusted my cufflinks. “As you well know, considering it was you who slipped Marchetti the tip.”

“Did I?”

On the one hand, I wanted nothing more than to reach for my gun and shoot the motherfucker for playing stupid mind games. On the other, I just wanted to get to Phoenix and get the fuck out of here. Three years was a long time to wait for someone, and my patience was running thin. I supposed the lack of sex might have had something to do with it too.

I glared at him. “Stop wasting my time.”

“Ah, your generation. Always so eager. Too quick to jump to conclusions.”

I let out a sardonic breath. “Maybe it’s you and your generation that’s the problem.”

Lykos had about two decades, maybe three, on me. He worked closely with Marchetti, and it was probably the reason he let him know he’d spotted Phoenix.

“Let’s cut the bullshit,” I drawled. “I’m here for Phoenix Romero. You said you saw her, and I want to know where. Knowing how you operate, you probably have her location narrowed down.”

He gave me an amused look. “Seems you have me figured out.”

God, give me patience, I chanted in my head. Shooting the man would be frowned upon. And anyhow, I didn’t need the hassle. I just needed my dandelion back in my life.

“Are you going to help or not?” I snapped.

He leaned back in his seat. “Of course I will. All you had to do was ask.”

This motherfucking fuck.

“Well, I’m asking. Give me her address and I’ll be on my way.”

Knowing Lykos’s character, he’d keep the tail on me until I was off his territory, which I was happy to oblige the moment I had Phoenix.

“Why such an interest in Phoenix Romero?” he drawled, sipping his damn coffee. I had yet to touch mine. I didn’t trust the Greek mobster not to have it poisoned. “Although I must admit, the young woman is impressive.” I gritted my teeth, the word *mine* bubbling in my throat, ready to erupt. “And very beautiful,” he added, unhelpfully.

“She’s my wife.”

His eyebrows met his hairline. “She’s not married.”

“Yet. It’s a matter of formalities.”

He watched my face and let out a scoff. “Does she know that?”

“She will, very soon. So stop buzzing around her, or I’ll put you six feet under. You catch my drift?”

Lykos laughed, but I was dead serious. “My, my, my, Dante Leone. Don’t you know obsessions like that can be maddening. Especially when unrequited.”

I didn’t bother dignifying his taunt with a response. “Just tell me where she is.”

“That’s easy. My place.” I lunged across the table, sending coffee flying around us, and we found ourselves face-to-face, his gun pointed at my forehead. “Don’t be foolish, Leone, or I’ll spill your brains right here and now.”

“Kill me and you’ll have the entire Omertà after you. Phoenix is one of our own, and we’ll keep coming. Wouldn’t you like that?”

It didn’t seem to draw the reaction I’d hoped for. No concern, just confidence.

“Let them come,” he mused.

“Did you touch her?” I straightened up and buttoned my jacket, ignoring the gun still pointed at me.

“No, and you’ll be pleased to know she hasn’t made contact with any other locals. She and her daughter have kept mostly to themselves.”

Her daughter? There must be some misunderstanding.

“Do you want to hear my plan or not, Leone?” Lykos demanded. “You can have Phoenix in your sight in the next two hours, or you can be a reckless dick and run around, exposed. Your choice.”

I studied him warily. Trust among criminals was a delicate thing, but my need for Nix outweighed it all. Without her, I might as well find a way to end this miserable life.

“I’m all ears.”

And fuck if he didn’t lay it on me thick. Nix was in trouble. In more ways than one.

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FORTY-SEVEN

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PHOENIX

Sunrises and sunsets bathing the hills in hues of gold, white-washed houses with their blue shutters and roofs, cobblestone streets, amazing food and even kinder people. Greece was heaven on earth.

It was too cold to swim in February, but I found a job giving piano lessons to one of the locals—a wealthy businessman—who allowed Skye to come along with me. It also gave his daughter Aria time to bond with Skye.

The Costello residence was about twenty minutes from Athens and had the most breathtaking views of the Aegean Sea.

Mr. Lykos Costello was even generous enough to allow us to use his indoor pool, but I only took him up on it when he wasn't home. Skye and Aria bonded while playing and splashing happily.

Four weeks had slipped away since landing in this country. I'd spent the time consumed in getting to know my daughter, with long walks on the beach and enjoying the flavors of Greek cuisine.

The day was warm and the sun glimmering through the windows made it feel like summer in this glass-enclosed space. I lounged by the indoor pool in a one-piece bathing suit, my hair pulled into a messy updo and my feet in the water as I watched my daughter's face beam with happiness.

Aria had picked up sign language effortlessly in the weeks since we'd been coming.

It was sheer luck that I spotted an ad in the paper, in English at that, seeking a tutor. The rest was history.

I sensed someone's presence and turned my head to see Mr. Lykos in the doorway dressed in a three-piece suit, pressed to perfection. Polished

Rolex and cufflinks. The glow from the sunrays cast him in lighter shades as his serious gaze took me in.

I shifted, a little self-conscious at being caught in such an exposed state despite the permission he'd given me. The man was the definition of a silver fox, and I had a feeling if Athena spotted him, she'd melt into a puddle of want. She had a thing for older men.

His gaze flickered with something akin to dry amusement.

"Having fun?" His English was impeccable, and so were his manners. His eyes drifted over my face, almost as if studying me in the same manner I was studying him. He was handsome in a brooding kind of way. I'd never seen a man with such thick, wavy dark hair and piercing eyes. His chiseled jaw sported a subtle five o'clock shadow and his broad shoulders were prominent. He could have easily been a model in his past life, if not for the raw power rolling off his taut frame. He wasn't exactly trim, but he wasn't bulky either. Just the right kind of physique to get your heart racing.

Sadly, my heart was broken, and it didn't respond to this man. Only one seemed to make it stir to life.

The smirk on his face when he met my gaze told me my staring didn't go unnoticed, and I blushed all the way to my roots.

I jumped to my feet and reached for my cover-up and phone, typing my reply as he approached me. **I hope you don't mind. We wanted to swim for a bit after piano lessons.**

His eyes dimmed to something warm as he looked over at the girls frolicking in the pool. "Of course not. I offered for a reason. I'm glad Aria's getting some socialization. She and your daughter get along really well."

I nodded. "*Thank you*," I signed.

There were only a handful of gestures he'd learned, but I appreciated it anyway. It was a major pain to type every single response out.

"You should consider staying here," he offered for the second time. "It'll save you money, and Aria will have the company of a girl her own age."

I flushed, lowering my gaze to my phone, then typed my response. **It's a very generous offer, but we're good. Thank you for giving me the job.**

I might have not grown up around Papà, but I always sensed the ruthless aura surrounding him. Mr. Lykos had that same darkness. I was desperate for a job, so I snatched the opportunity, but I had no intention of getting too close to him.

I caught Skye's attention and waved her over. "*It's time to go home*." Both girls frowned. "*We'll see each other next week*," I said, attempting to ease the blow.

Mr. Lykos's hand came to my shoulder and I turned to him.

"How about I have my driver take you back to town?" he offered.

I smiled and accepted. The bus service in Greece was hit or miss.

If only I'd known then what was waiting for me at the end of that drive.

I spotted him the moment I slid out of the black car, Skye's hand in mine. I kept my expression blank as I stared at him, cursing up a storm in my head. Would I run into someone in every damn city I visited? He wasn't supposed to be in Greece. Of all the fucking countries in the world, why did he have to appear here?

Because he's stalking you, idiot!

I fought the impulse to run after the car as it drove off, leaving me standing and facing my past yet again.

Dante Leone.

He sat on an old bench on the corner of the street, next to a local who seemed to be talking his ear off despite Dante not acknowledging him. The gentleman chuckled and carried on, nonplussed, but Dante hadn't broken his gaze from me.

I looked away quickly, but it took all of one second to notice his messy hair and the cigarette dangling from his beautiful mouth, looking like an angry god. His deep blue eyes settled on me, his face twisted with an expression I couldn't pinpoint.

Whatever it was, a glimpse of it had my heart plummeting into my feet.

His gaze told me he wasn't surprised to see me. In fact, he'd been waiting for me, and for whatever reason, I knew that Lykos Costello had sent me back into the wolf's den.

Someone bumped into me, making me almost lose my footing, but I quickly caught myself. Dante's expression darkened, glaring at the innocent bystander who muttered words I couldn't read from his mouth.

Then an idea hit me like lightning. It was wicked. It was devious. It was perfect. I'd turn the tables on Dante and act like I didn't remember *him*. Let him get a taste of his own medicine.

Lowering my gaze to Skye, I smiled softly. "*Want to go for a walk before we head back to our hotel room*?"

She nodded and we started walking toward Dante. His lips curved into a smile, and with each closing step, his smile grew wider. Three steps. Two. One.

I walked right by him, his masculine scent drifting into my nostrils, and didn't spare him a glance. As if I'd never seen him in my life.

Dante rose from his seat, and my heart involuntarily skipped a beat. He was the only one who had this effect on me. I could feel his eyes on my back, sending shivers down my spine.

He passed me before turning around to face me. "Hello, Nix. Long time no see," he signed with a smirk.

I furrowed my brow and blinked, applying any and all skills I'd learned from my grandmother over the years.

My lips curved into a shy, hesitant smile. "*I'm sorry. Have we met*?"

Take that, motherfucker, I thought to myself.

Confusion crossed his expression before it turned inquisitive, eyes never leaving my face as if he was trying to decipher my intentions.

Seconds stretched, and I felt Skye's small hand squeeze mine tightly. I loosened my grip, hating that the mere presence of him got to me in such a way. It was disturbing how unsettled he made me feel. I never expected to see him again, yet here he was, standing in front of me.

He smiled, and my traitorous heart went racing.

His eyes lowered to Skye. "And who are you?"

Skye narrowed her eyes on him. "*I'm the one who's going to whoop your ass*."

That's my girl, I couldn't help but think smugly. I'd get her an extra cookie after dinner.

But I had to play the part. "*Manners, Skye*," I reminded her, smiling softly, then looked at Dante again. "*I'm sorry, can we help you*?"

"Are you fucking with me, Nix?"

I almost snorted. Almost. But I kept up my performance while studying him as if seeing him for the first time.

He looked as handsome as I remembered, albeit tired. He wore faded jeans and a black cashmere shirt, and he smelled like he'd recently taken a shower. *Fresh and woodsy*. His hair was styled and neat, ever the professional.

"*Sir, I'm not sure what you mean,*" I signed. "*I would never fuck with you or any stranger. It's unbecoming.*"

His gaze was intense, danger emanating off him in waves and aiming daggers straight at my chest. Under the relaxed, unbothered facade hid a killer.

"Do you remember me?" He signed the question casually while I held my—our—daughter's hand. The three of us, the way it should have been from the beginning. *We would dance through life together.* The words he'd given me five years ago danced in my mind.

His finger brushed over my cheek so tenderly I had to stifle a shudder. I tried to convince myself it was due to fear. If he found me, the Nikolaevs were bound to find us too. I had to get moving, and that realization snapped my spine straight. I didn't want to get caught. I still had a number of things to show Skye, we had so many things to live for.

"*No,*" I lied, feigning surprise at his use of ASL. Let him suffer for a bit. "*Your ASL is excellent.*"

He eyed me suspiciously, as if debating whether to believe my act. "What happened to you?" he questioned.

I blinked innocently, giving him an Oscar-worthy performance. "*I'm not sure what you mean, sir.*"

He smirked. "You can call me Dante. After all, I'm your fiancé."

This goddamned man and his boldness. I couldn't decide whether I liked it or not. Definitely not. Except what should I do now? If I called him out on his lie, he'd know I faked my amnesia. If I went along with it… Well, that might not be such a terrible idea.

Dante could protect Skye and me from the Nikolaevs' wrath. That whole bunch was mental. Let the maniacs battle it out with Dante. *Ingenious*.

"*Really*?" I even fluttered my lashes. Damn, I was good. "*How can that be? I don't remember you*." Then I lowered my eyes to my fingers. "*And no ring*." I raised my hand up between us. "*See, no ring.*"

"I have the ring in my safe." He sure had an answer for everything.

"*But that would mean you haven't asked me to marry you,*" I pointed out, ensuring I wouldn't glare at him when I really wanted to punch him in his beautiful face. The fucker arranged a marriage with my sister, and now he thought he could settle with me.

He smiled softly. "I did, and you said yes. We love each other very much." Jesus, the man knew how to lie with a straight face. He brushed his thumb over my bottom lip gently, making my heart skip a beat. "I like you as a brunette better."

"*I like you dead better*." Shit, that came out without my permission, and I instantly regretted it. By now, it had become second nature to fight him. "*It's rude to criticize someone you barely know.*" I tried to dig myself out of this shit. "*And how do you know I'm actually a brunette*?"

"You're my fiancée, remember?" I shot him a glare. *As if I could forget.* "You and I will get married. It's been a long time coming."

Maybe this amnesia play wasn't so smart. It was preventing me from letting out my rage.

His eyes lowered to Skye who eyed him warily. She'd endured too many changes over the last month. She needed stability, not psychotic Dante in her life. Although, he *was* her biological father.

I shrugged. "*This is my daughter.*" I lowered my eyes to Skye and smiled reassuringly. "*We've been traveling the world.*" Except, we'd gotten too comfortable here. I pushed the thought away—I needed to stay on task. I shot him a bewildered look. "*But you must know that already, being my fiancé and all.*"

The look on Dante's face was priceless. Shock. Disbelief. Back to shock. "She looks like you," he remarked. I nodded, my chest constricting and making it difficult to breathe and keep up the ruse. I believed she had some of his traits too. "I'm not much for kids."

I shrugged. "*Yeah, I'm not much for men, but here we are*." Goddammit. I had to do a better job of controlling myself. "*Anyhow, as my fiancé, you'd know Skye and I are a package deal*."

Skye's eyes were darting from him to me, and I worried she'd get a bout of whiplash. She tugged on my hand and I lowered my eyes. "*Is he really your fiancé?*"

I bit the inside of my cheek, wishing I could have some alone time to talk it through with her. "*He claims so, but we shall see*."

Her delicate brows furrowed. “*Would that make him my dad, or do I have another dad?*”

Okay, it seemed I was digging myself in deep here. I didn’t want to lie to her, but I couldn’t exactly tell her the truth with Dante’s eyes on me.

“*Let’s not worry about daddies right now*,” I signed. It was the best I could come up with.

“Actually, let’s worry about them,” Dante butted in. Then his face became an unreadable mask, his nostrils the only betrayal of his fury. “Does your father know about Skye?” I shook my head. “Your sister?”

“*No*.”

“How did you keep her a secret?” he questioned. “For five years at that. Are you sure you’re not hiding something?”

God, I was hiding so much shit I didn’t know if there was a way out of my secrets at this point.

“*Considering I have amnesia, I’m probably hiding many things*.” I congratulated myself on such a good comeback.

“Fine, I’ll give you that.” I barely stifled an eye-roll. “The name.”

Huh? He was giving me whiplash with his abrupt topic change.

I blinked. “*Excuse me*?”

“I want the father’s name.” I swallowed at the subtle threat shining in his eyes, his intent clear.

Was he toying with me? I couldn’t tell. His expression was suddenly so closed off that I didn’t know what to make of it, but he looked dead serious from where I stood.

This man consumed, obliterated, ruined. He took everything and left nothing in his wake. He was an unrepentant sinner. He was a destroyer, a murderer, a torturer.

The man who held my heart in his cruel, brutal hand was the father of my child.

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FORTY-EIGHT

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DANTE

I’d just been fucking tasered in the heart. Amnesia and a daughter? It couldn’t be. She had to be fucking with me. There weren’t such big coincidences in life.

Yet, why would she lie? There weren’t many people who knew about my amnesia. Or my kidnapping.

The red mist thickened in my vision. My pulse in my ears drummed faster and faster. For a moment, the anger was so blinding I wanted to hurt her. Punish her. The thought that she might love someone else sent fury through me. I wanted to show her that she belonged to me and only me. Fuck her so hard so she’d forget everyone and everything else.

But then an image flashed through the fog. The faceless woman became Nix. She danced in a field of dandelions with me. Her lips on mine. Her hands wrapped around my waist while she watched me with a soft smile and an adoring look.

It couldn’t be. She’d never even offered me a smile. She’d never danced with me. She never looked at me like *that*—like I was the only man in the world.

I shook my head, chasing distorted images out of my mind.

“I want his name, Phoenix,” I mouthed. I still couldn’t believe that this whole time she had a daughter and I never knew. Fuck, did I know her at all? Maybe I’d gone about this wrong all along. What if that bastard hurt her, and that was the reason she was so guarded around me?

Her brows crinkled. “*What will that accomplish?*”

This whole amnesia thing… I wasn’t exactly convinced, but I could play it in my favor if she wanted to go down this route. My eyes traveled

over her sun-kissed skin and long hair, no longer brunette but fiery red. I hated what she'd done to it, but I still loved those big blue eyes.

"I'm going to talk to him." *I'm going to kill him.* The lie spilled effortlessly from my lips. "You're my fiancée, and it's up to me to take care of you and your daughter."

At least that much was true. Well, kind of. The amnesia worked in my favor and I fully planned to take advantage of it. I just couldn't quite figure out whether she was faking it. Every so often, I thought I saw her eyes twinkle or a smirk start to curve her lips, but then it'd disappear just as quickly.

"How did you lose your memories?" I asked her.

"*Bumped my head*," she answered. "*It's selective memory loss.*"

"I see. Well, you and I were arranged to get married last year," I told her vaguely. It was a little white lie. I was engaged to Reina only to get to her. Nix had always been my endgame. "You kept your daughter a secret, but that won't stop me. The three of us will dance through life together."

Staring at Phoenix as she and her daughter looked at me with those baby-blue eyes, I couldn't help but feel smug about thinking on my feet. It was the first thing that'd worked when it came to Nix, and I had to admit, it felt nice not to have her stare at me with disdain.

There was no way of telling how things would turn out, so I'd have to hurry up and marry her before her memory returned so she'd be mine forever. Maybe fate would be on my side for once, and Nix's memory wouldn't return until after I slid my ring on her finger.

She smiled softly and I found my heart pounding in an odd way. For the past three years, this had felt like a lost cause, and it was nice to see this side of her.

I leaned forward and brushed my knuckles over her soft cheek.

"I'm so happy I found you," I signed, and my heart might have melted a little. I enjoyed our bickering, but this… I thought I could love this even more. My gaze dropped to the little girl standing by Phoenix's legs. "You too," I told the little girl, although we'd have to figure out the whole father issue. *Later.* The last thing I wanted to do was spoil the moment.

The girl glared at me and I let out a heavy sigh. Like mother, like daughter. "*You make my mamma cry and I'll whoop your ass.*"

I smiled, her daughter holding eye contact. Brave little thing.

I hunched down to her eye level. “Fair enough. And I promise I’ll let you.”

That earned me a smile while the little girl looked at me from beneath her dark lashes. Fuck if my black heart didn’t twitch. She was a replica of her mamma. Between that and Phoenix’s protectiveness, she’d snatched a piece of my heart already.

Kids weren’t my thing, but I knew, right there and then, that I’d lay my life down for this little girl.

“*Her name is Skye*,” Phoenix explained, signing with her free hand. “*She’s deaf too*.”

I extended my hand and Skye readily took it. “Nice to meet you, Skye. I’m Dante,” I signed and mouthed the words.

I rose to my full height to find Nix watching the two of us with an uneasy gleam in her eyes. Distrustful. I’d have to earn it, then. If what Lykos had indicated about Nix kidnapping the girl was true, maybe I’d be her accomplice and earn her trust. I’d have her back through thick and thin, right or wrong.

I’d show her they both mattered to me. We’d be a family.

A soft tug on my pants had me lowering my gaze. “*Are you going to keep my mamma and me safe*?”

Nix casted a look at me but quickly averted her eyes.

“Always,” I vowed.

Skye smiled, her little hands moving. “*I liked my other mamma too, I’ll miss her*.”

Phoenix winced but she didn’t elaborate, and all the while, Lykos’s words rang in my ears. Sasha Nikolaev’s kid disappeared and Phoenix was the last one to be seen with the little girl. Why would she take her and pass her off as her own though? I studied the girl. She was Phoenix’s spitting image. She reminded me of the two little girls who’d broken my father’s priceless vase two decades ago.

I met Phoenix’s eyes, the glint in them signaling unwavering stubbornness. It was clear she wouldn’t share anything with me. No need to pressure her. First things first, we’d get married.

“We’re going home.” Nix paled at my words, her dark lashes resting on her skin. I trailed a fingertip over her high cheekbones, enjoying the softness of her skin. She watched me, her expression vulnerable. I moved closer. “Are you okay, Nix?”

If anyone—including the Nikolaevs—had hurt her, I'd hunt them down and make them regret ever crossing paths with her.

"*Why do you keep calling me Nix*?"

I touched the back of her head and pulled her toward me. "Because you're my light and darkness. My temptress." Her eyes lowered to my lips. "Should I kiss you so you'll remember me?"

Her eyes met mine, iridescently blue with a flicker of lust, but then she wiped her expression clear of all the feelings.

We stood still, inches from each other, her cheeks flushed with emotion and her lips tempting me, reeling me in. It had been years since I'd tasted her. Since her soft body writhed against mine.

Nix broke our stare first and looked to where Skye was skipping on one foot. She moved to lift her, but I stopped her.

"Let me." She froze midair. Fuck, hopefully I didn't overstep. I didn't know much about children, and my own childhood wasn't much of a reference. "If it's okay with you, I could give her a piggyback ride?" Phoenix stared long and hard at me before she gave me a terse nod. "Or I could give her a ride on my shoulders?" I offered, signing.

That sold Skye and she was leaning away from her mother to come to me. I remained still until Nix gave me permission.

"*Be careful*," she warned.

I softened my expression and nodded, then addressed Skye in the gentle way I recalled Mother using with Amon and me.

"Which would you like, Skye? Piggyback or up on my shoulders?" She pointed to my shoulders, smiling wildly, so I scooped her up and plopped her onto my shoulders. A happy squeal left her mouth, and I couldn't help but smile too.

"*You drop her and it's your life*." Phoenix was a mamma bear.

"I'll protect her with my life," I mouthed, meaning it more than anything I'd ever said before. An expression passed Nix's eyes. Maybe it was suspicion, but it almost looked like… pride.

Skye's fingers gripped my hair like I was her own personal pony, making my scalp ache, but the pain was worth it. I had Nix and her daughter with me.

We started walking when Nix tugged my sleeve gently and signed, "*Where are we going?*"

I smiled. "To get married."

Yeah, I wasn't wasting my time. Her steps paused and I stopped too, turning to face her. "*Today?*" I nodded. Her mouth parted, her cheeks flushing bright red. "*I need a different dress.*"

She was actually considering it? I could hardly believe it.

"You could wear rags and you'd still be the most beautiful woman on this planet."

Nix shook her head. "*We have to set a good example for Skye*."

"Let's shop for a dress, then. For you and Skye."

"*Thank you.*"

We resumed walking while the wheels in my mind spun faster and faster. The wisest thing to do was to take her to Trieste and keep her safe there. Cesar already had a priest on standby, but if the underworld was looking for her, it'd run the risk of uninvited guests. Going home might have to wait.

I thought of her in a dress, walking down the aisle toward me, and everything that would come after… Fuck, it was all I ever wanted. Nix, my dandelion, as my wife.

I turned my head so Nix could read my lips. "How do you feel about going to Scotland for a bit?"

Phoenix eyed me. "*It's cold in Scotland. I hate the cold*." I did too. A dark expression passed her features and her next words surprised me. "*And my grandma is in that general area*."

I studied her curiously. "You don't get along with your grandma?"

"*I'd rather not be around her right now*," she answered cryptically.

"Where would you like to get married, then?"

She shrugged, her eyes watching Skye with maternal worry. "*Somewhere warm, I guess, but why the rush*?"

I met her eyes, drowning in their blues. "Because I love you."

I was certain I had never spoken truer words.

"*And I love you*?" she asked.

God, I fucking hoped so. We had this amazing chemistry, but we needed time to get to know each other. Just the two of us… correction, *three* of us. *The three of us will dance through life together.* The familiar words pierced through my mind, almost as if I'd spoken them before.

Chasing the ghosts away, I cupped her cheeks tenderly. "There's nobody else for you, dandelion, and there's nobody else for me."

It was as close to the truth as I dared to go.

Surprise flickered in her eyes. “*Really?*”

“Yes.”

“*How long have we been engaged?*”

I tucked a dark curl behind her ear before I resumed walking. “Three years.”

“*And you’re okay with me having a child?*”

Fuck, this was tricky. I was okay with it as long as the father didn’t come into the picture. Then I’d have to murder him. It was better I went with a half-truth. “Yes, the three of us are family.”

The smile on Phoenix’s face had me stopping again. I framed her face, pulling her close to me and pressing a kiss to her mouth. Her tongue darted out, brushing against mine, and my lips moved against hers.

My heart skipped a fucking beat at the intensity of it and everything stilled inside me like it did when I fucked her at the club.

No demons. No ghosts.

A giggle sounded and I yanked away from her.

I shook my head and smiled, then draped an arm around Phoenix’s shoulders as we walked to the hotel, looking like the family I never had.

Growing up under my father’s rule, paranoia was instilled in me.

I fought like hell not to be like him, but the moment we arrived at Phoenix’s hotel, old demons emerged. I’d like to say I wasn’t a control freak, but with her, it’d be a lie. I wanted her in my vicinity and in my sight at all times. I couldn’t risk her escaping me again.

The white stone building stood tall in the foreground as we argued, Phoenix’s hands balled into fists and my jaw rolling painfully.

“I’m going with you to your room.” I noticed Skye wasn’t as good as Phoenix at reading lips, so I stuck to mouthing the words, determined not to scare her.

Skye and Nix stood by the hotel door, Nix attempting to block my passage. As if she could ever hold me back. Skye shifted on her little legs, her big blue eyes darting between us hesitantly.

“*You’re not. Wait here*.”

I gritted my teeth. There was no chance in hell that I'd risk her slipping away from me. "No."

"*Yes*."

"*Dante and I can wait here*," Skye chimed in, signing in perfect ASL. The girl had a killer sixth sense.

"Yes," I agreed.

"*No*." Nix was determined to fight me at every step.

"Either we all go in," I signed, my hand movements jerky due to my tension. I couldn't even mouth the words because of how hard I was biting the skin inside my cheek. "Or leave her with me and we'll wait for you to pack up."

We stared at each other, both of us too stubborn to back down, when a little hand slipped into mine.

"*We all go*," Skye signed, smiling widely, and I watched as tension left Nix's shoulders and her face softened. God, the kid was amazing. I'd have to ensure I always had her on my side when I wanted to win an argument. I also knew right then and there, Skye would be our neutralizer. We would always do what was best for her first and foremost.

It was peculiar though. Nix claimed to have lost her memories, but she still fought me at every turn as if it was ingrained into her DNA. Not that I was a hundred percent convinced she wasn't lying. I remembered waking up in the hospital with amnesia, and for a brief moment, my hate and anger at my father eased. Until I started remembering and it came back stronger than ever.

"*Okay*," she agreed.

My heart raced as we walked through the little lobby of the quaint hotel. The reception desk was crowded as the three of us bypassed it and made our way up the stone stairs that had seen better days.

Why isn't she staying somewhere nicer? I wondered.

She withdrew two million dollars before she took off. It'd only been two months. She couldn't have blown through that money already.

We came up to one of the doors on the top floor and Nix dug through her little satchel, pulling out a key. Pushing it into the keyhole, she unlocked the door and the three of us entered.

My eyes traveled over the room. Two twin beds, a dresser, and a private bathroom. No AC. A clean but basic room. There wasn't even a TV in here.

Phoenix’s eyes filled with regret, as though she wished she could have hidden this from me. She could barely look at me, and I didn’t miss the flush creeping along the apples of her cheeks.

I kneeled down and signed to Skye while speaking softly. “Can you grab all your stuff and put it in the suitcase? Don’t worry about making it pretty. Just shove it all in and we’ll worry about it when we get to my place.”

Skye nodded eagerly and then went to work.

I rose to my full height and lifted my index finger to Nix’s chin, tipping her face toward mine. Her reluctant gaze met mine, and it was filled with defiance. If things weren’t so serious, I’d probably smirk at her attitude.

“What happened?” I mouthed so only she could understand me. I kept my expression soft, not wanting her to clam up. “You had two million dollars. You should be able to afford more than this.”

She remained quiet and I reached for her hand, entwining it with mine. To my surprise, she let me, and my heart shuddered in my chest. It. Fucking. Shuddered. I relished the moment, inhaling her spring rain scent into my lungs.

Fuck, I’d missed her scent. I didn’t give a shit what Cesar had to say about my stalking or Dr. Freud said about unhealthy habits. I felt normal… right… around her. In body and soul.

“Just let me help you, Nix.”

She looked away and shook her head, but the subtle tremble of her lip didn’t escape me. Then she pushed against my chest and took a step back.

“*I don’t remember anything about two million dollars,*” she signed, and I knew she was lying. I didn’t know how I knew it, but I did. “*I have to change out of my bathing suit. Do I have time for a quick shower*?”

“Go ahead,” I told her, reluctantly giving her some space. I could see that she didn’t trust me yet, and it wouldn’t do me any good showing up and taking her independence from her.

She began hustling around the small bedroom, shoving what she had into her suitcase and helping her daughter along the way. I pulled out my phone and took the opportunity to type a message to Cesar.

I need you to stock up my closet in the castello with women's clothing. Casual. Formal. Send someone into her Paris apartment and grab her stuff. Get some clothes suitable for a five-year-old girl. And set up a room, the one closest to mine is perfect for a little girl's room.

I flicked a glance at my girls and smiled. They were perfect. It didn't matter who the father was—I'd eliminate him and Skye would be mine. She already owned a piece of my heart.

"Skye, what's your favorite color?" I signed.

She grinned. "*Pink*."

I chuckled. Somehow it didn't surprise me. It had to be in her blood, taking after Reina. I quickly typed Cesar another message.

Get lots of stuff in pink for a five-year-old girl. And find a nanny. Marchetti mentioned a nanny whisperer to Illias not too long ago. See if you can find her.

My phone buzzed shortly after, and I slid the message open.

I don't even want to know. Just don't cry to me when you get shot again.

Why in the fuck did I put up with Cesar? He was annoying and completely unsupportive. If he wasn't so dependable and faithful, almost to a fault, I'd have given him the axe a while ago. My father hired him, thinking he'd be loyal to him, but Cesar's allegiances were always to me. He was six years older than me and a wiseass, but there was nobody I trusted more, aside from my brother.

A thought struck me and Cesar was immediately forgotten. I knew exactly where I'd take Nix and Skye.

Send a message to the property manager to stock up the cabin in Lake Tahoe.

We'd have our wedding in Trieste and honeymoon in Tahoe.

I'd show her she could depend on me. In sickness and in health. For better or for worse.

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FORTY-NINE

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PHOENIX

Dante was a goddamn liar, but then again, so was I.

So here we were, both playing a role. How in the fuck did he find us? Did Lykos know who I was all along? It was dumb using Skye's real name and the nickname that Dante had given me with Lykos. I did it to preserve some normalcy for Skye, but it got us caught. *Damn it.* I let out a heavy sigh. It didn't really matter now. Dante had found us and we'd deal with it.

In fact, it might be a lucky break, because I'd never stand a chance against Sasha Nikolaev alone. With Dante, I might be able to actually keep Skye.

Fiancée, I scoffed silently in my head. He really had some nerve.

After we packed up, he got us on the plane and brought us to Trieste. It was better than going to Scotland. Wild horses wouldn't be able to drag me close to my grandmother. I wouldn't put it past her to try and take Skye away from me, but I'd never allow her to make decisions for me again.

The little castello by the sea was where I first laid eyes on him at eight years old. It looked just as I remembered. *Magical.*

Minus one evil king.

Angelo Leone had been replaced by his son. The man of the Omertà. A mobster who once loved me. The man who broke my heart. The man I shot. So much history dragged us down. Could we—no, could *I* let go of it?

I flicked a glance at my daughter whose eyes sparked, darting left and right, up and down, mesmerized by everything she saw. The sun had started its descent and she took the time to run to every window, pointing at different trees and birds in the distance and the waves rolling in.

“*Can we stay here*?” she signed, dancing around like she was high on sugar. I brought a hand up to my mouth, amazed at this little girl and her ability to withstand so much change in her life. “*I’m sad we left Aria. She was my friend. Could we invite her to visit so I can show her this castle*?”

Before I could reply, Dante spoke. “Yes, I hope you stay here with us forever. I’m sure we can arrange a visit with Aria.”

My heart fluttered, but I immediately scolded myself. All my focus would remain on Skye. I was only using Dante for his… unhinged ways. Ruthlessness. His connections.

I wasn’t naive enough to think that the Nikolaev family wouldn’t come after me. After all, Tatiana knew *exactly* who I was. The underworld knew my name, and there was no doubt that they were after me.

“Skye, want to see your room?” Dante signed, a smile brightening his face.

Her eyes widened, as did mine. “*I have a room here?*”

He nodded. “You do now. And we can change it however you’d like.”

Skye’s eyes darted to me in wonder and I gave her a nod, smiling. There was no chance in hell I’d ruin this for her. Not after I dragged her from the safety of the Nikolaevs’ home. Even I could admit she had a good life with them, and no one deserved it more than her after four years of constantly bouncing from one family to another. The foster families found her lack of hearing a shortcoming. The Nikolaevs took it as a challenge and loved her despite it.

For that, I’d forever owe them.

I would have to contend with my own selfishness. I’d need to make things right one day, no matter what, even if it felt like I’d been handed a solid dose of karma already. Robbed of my money, dragging my daughter across the world and forcing her to live in squalor compared to the arrangements I was sure she’d had with the Nikolaevs.

I wouldn’t change it, not when I had my daughter back in my arms, but I vowed to make sure she was taken care of from here on out.

“Come on. Let’s go show Skye her new room,” Dante announced, hooking his arm around me.

Next he directed Skye from the large living room, up the stairs, and down the hallway. It was like a treasure hunt, and our daughter loved every second of it.

I loved and hated how good he was with her, because it was a painful reminder of how he didn't come through five years ago. Skye would have been spared years of bouncing from family to family if he had just shown up.

I couldn't stop worrying every day and every night since I took her from the Nikolaevs whether I'd damaged my daughter. She didn't show any obvious signs of trauma—not that I knew much on the topic—and she was comfortable enough with me to seek comfort when she needed it.

Yet, I worried. It must be every mother's job—to worry endlessly about their children.

Skye opened the door Dante directed her to and her lips parted in surprise as her eyes darted around the room.

The last sliver of sun was setting over the horizon, its muted rays trickling into the pink bedroom. Pink fairy lights twinkled from the ceiling. Pink and white drapes hung on either side of the two floor-to-ceiling windows. There was a black chalkboard, Disney princesses scattered everywhere, and my personal favorite… Legos.

My thoughts churned as we stood in the bedroom that was every little girl's dream. I swallowed a lump in my throat. I should have been able to offer my daughter all this, but all I had given her were bare hotel rooms. There was a static noise in my brain, blaming me for my poor choices.

"We can change anything you don't like," Dante signed and spoke, misreading my furrowed brow.

I picked up a stray Lego from the floor and turned it over in my palm while tears stung my eyes. The bed was made and the carpet looked freshly vacuumed, but there was no shortage of toys.

I blinked hard, trying to get myself together. I didn't want to ruin this moment, but I couldn't seem to stop all these emotions from swirling in my chest. It had been a long and confusing day, and I was overreacting to everything. This bedroom, the perfect little princess bed, the Legos… It all worked to showcase the confident, assured way Dante was in his skin, which I loved much more than I should.

"*I love everything*," Skye signed while bouncing on her legs like an Energizer bunny. If she loved the room, that was all that mattered to me. "*Can I play for a little bit?*"

Dante nodded before taking my hand and pulling me out of the room. The door shut behind us and he turned me so that I was facing him.

“What’s wrong?” Since I refused to look at him, he took my chin firmly between his fingers and tilted it up. “Tell me what’s wrong or we’ll stand here all night.”

I sniffed, freeing myself from his grasp. “*Nothing.*”

My heart hammered, but not from panic. It was the growing swell of emotions suffocating me.

“Okay, then. Let’s get comfortable here, because we’re not moving until you tell me.”

“*I’m a terrible mother,*” I signed as a tear rolled down my cheek and my lips trembled.

His brows scrunched. “Why do you say that?”

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. “*Because you gave her all thi*s.” I pointed to the closed door, behind which Skye was probably playing happily for the first time since I’d taken her. “*I gave her—*” A strangled sob escaped me. “*I gave her nothing.*”

His fingers still on my chin, he brought one up to brush my cheek.

“Look at me and listen carefully,” he ordered, and the old Dante I knew was back. Bossy and annoying. “You gave her life. You gave her love. All of that—” He jutted his head toward the bedroom. “That’s just material shit. Besides, I didn’t even pick it. I had to ask Cesar to put it together. We can take the time to redecorate it together.”

Shit, when he was generous and kind like this, it was hard to resist him. I preferred the asshole so I could keep my barriers up. The loneliness I’d felt over the last few months, the pain of the previous years, the worries—it all faded away.

My eyes lowered to his lips without my permission, and part of me craved to feel them against mine. To feel close to him, the way we’d been five years ago.

“*Why are you looking at me that way?*” Like he loved me. Like he needed me.

He tensed, silence stretching between us. His presence warmed my skin while he watched me with something that tugged at my heartstrings. Something dark and genuine, vulnerable. And he was letting *me* see it.

“Awake or asleep, sane or insane, all I see is your face. All I feel is your touch. All I want is you.” The pressure in my chest grew so tight it brought another rush of tears to my eyes.

“*Why?*” His expression and the way he stilled at my question made my heart beat faster. “*What if we ran?*”

Something conflicting flared in his eyes, terrifying and thrilling at the same time.

“There’s nowhere you could go that I wouldn’t find you,” he vowed. “Try to leave me, Nix,” he said, his eyes narrowing to slits. “I’ll turn over every rock until I find you. I’ll never stop.” He leaned closer, letting out a sardonic breath. “So if you run, dandelion, you’d better keep moving, because I’ll be right behind you.”

And I knew right there and then that there was no moving on from Dante Leone.

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FIFTY

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DANTE

She stared at me with those bright sapphires, punching tiny but unforgiving holes in my heart. Fear crept into her eyes, but there was defiance there too. It made my balls tighten, every fiber of me demanding I claim her.

My hands clenched into fists, fighting the instinct.

"*Where's my room?*" she finally asked. "*I hope it's close to my daughter's.*"

I raised my eyebrows in amusement. "Our room is close to Skye's."

She flushed but held my gaze head-on. It was what I'd always liked about her. Her fire.

I stared back at her, not giving away how much I loved our banter. The truth was that I also craved the next part that never seemed to come. The make-up sex, or whatever the fuck it was called. Different scenarios flashed before my eyes: Phoenix arching her back in pleasure as I ate her pussy, me fucking her beautiful mouth, or even better, her body folded over the side of my bed as I pounded her into oblivion.

"*Fine*," she caved. "*Show me our room*." She rolled her eyes, ensuring there was no mistaking her displeasure.

Donatella, the nanny whisperer that Marchetti recommended to Illias for their upcoming twins, just came up the stairs, flicking us a curious look. "Can you keep an eye on Skye?" I asked her, and her gaze darted to Nix as if asking for permission, so I signed, "Is it okay if Donatella keeps an eye on Skye*?*" Hesitation flickered in her expression. "We ran a background check, and I ran through her references while we were flying back from Greece."

“I’m also good with American Sign Language,” Donatella chimed in, signing proficiently. Nix’s eyebrows met her hairline in surprise. “My grandparents were deaf, and they’re American.”

A heartbeat passed before Nix answered, “*Yes, thank you*.”

Donatella disappeared into Skye’s room, leaving the door open. She must have signed something to Skye, because she answered, “Sure, I’d love to build legos with you.”

A soft, happy giggle traveled through the air, and I knew Skye would be in good hands.

We continued walking the length of the hallway until we reached our bedroom. It was the largest room in the castle, once belonging to Archduke Maximilian of Habsburg’s wife, Princess Charlotte. The large sitting room’s décor was accented in royal blue, with a fireplace in the far right corner next to large french doors that opened to the balcony overlooking the sea.

Her footsteps silent against the Persian rugs, she made her way to the adjoining room, coming to a stop in front of the long mirror. A grand archway led to the master bedroom where a four-poster bed sat between matching ornate, hand-carved nightstands and a mahogany chest of drawers.

“*Wow, this is beautiful*.” She seemed surprised. She studied the bedroom with an unreadable expression, and I couldn’t resist trailing a finger over the curve of her neck.

Her eyes met mine in the mirror, and an arrow of heat shot straight to my groin. I didn’t think. Even if I had, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself. I stepped closer to her until her back met my front, my cock nestling against the curve of her ass.

Her scent of fresh spring rain surrounded me and filled me with fierce longing. This woman made me burn hotter than an inferno. I watched our reflection in the mirror, her breasts rising and falling with each movement.

She looked wild and untamed with her red curls framing her face and her lips parted temptingly. Goddammit, I wanted to fuck her like this, standing up, watching as I thrust into her from behind.

Before I realized it, my hands were on her shoulders, cutting a path along the soft flesh of her neck. She was tense, I could feel it in her muscles. I acted on instinct and began massaging her shoulders, kneading the rock-hard knots.

Her beautiful, lush lips trembled. She hesitantly turned around to face me and I fully expected her to shove me away, to scold me. She did neither. Instead, she stood there, waiting.

I reached a hand out and stroked her bottom lip. What she did next surprised me. Darting her tongue out while keeping her eyes fixed on me, she licked the pad of my thumb. She licked and sucked with such enthusiasm that I wanted nothing more than to push her down onto her knees and see her lips wrapped around my cock, sucking me down.

It's too soon, my brain warned. *Win her over first.*

I yanked my finger and cupped her face so she'd read my lips. "On your knees."

Great, now I was a hypocrite too.

She blinked in confusion but didn't question me. She sank down to her knees, looking up at me with her lips parted and cheeks flushed. My dick hardened painfully in my slacks and her eyes dipped to my groin.

My reason and my cock battled as I fought the need to fuck her mouth. I craved her, yet I wanted to do right by her. I'd turned her world upside down, and although she came willingly—which I was still suspicious about—I couldn't help but think she was hiding something.

She reached for my belt, making the decision for me, but I grabbed her hands. She yanked them out of my grip and signed, "*I want to suck your cock*."

Jesus H. Christ.

It was game over.

But I had my own demands too. "First take your shirt and bra off. I want to see your tits as you suck me."

To my shock, she obeyed. I watched as she stripped her shirt off and unhooked her bra, her tits spilling out. My chest rose and fell rapidly as adrenaline rushed to my head. Both of them.

"Now, take my dick out and suck me."

Her hands slid up my thighs, skimming over my length through the fabric of my trousers. A growl tore from my throat. If she didn't hurry up, this would be over before we began, and that'd be unacceptable.

She flicked open my belt, then unfastened my trousers. Her fingers brushed lightly over the ridge of my cock and I shuddered. So close. Not close enough. She took me the rest of the way out, her eyes locked on my length. She licked her lips but made no move to take it into her mouth.

I grabbed the nape of her neck and pulled her forward while fisting the base of my shaft with my other hand. “Suck it and keep your eyes on me.”

She opened her mouth obediently and I thrust inside, all the way to the back of her throat. Her pale skin turned red, but she didn’t fight me. Her eyes filled with tears, but she looked at me with… trust. Fuck, it couldn’t be.

Apparently all it took was a blow job to become fully delusional.

Cupping her cheek, I said, “If it becomes too much, tap my thigh.”

She blinked her agreement and opened her mouth wider. I pulled out, and she inhaled deeply before I thrust in again. She licked my cock and hollowed out her cheeks as I started to fuck her throat harder. Deeper.

She didn’t tap out, no matter how ruthless my movements grew. Spit and tears covered her chin.

“So good, dandelion,” I grunted, nearing my peak. “You’re mine. Made only for me.”

I didn’t know if she could read my mouth, but I could tell she loved it. Her eyes brightened and a moan vibrated in her throat. I fucked her mouth with rough strokes, my hand on her nape, guiding her.

She gagged and I stilled, but I didn’t pull out. I waited until she recovered, took another breath, then advanced a bit more.

Her eyes locked on my face. “You’re doing so good. I’m going to come so hard. Just a little more.”

She blinked her permission and with the last flick of my hips, I was shoved all the way in. Her throat tightened and I moaned, my fingers gripping her skin. Another lick of her tongue against my cock drove me over the edge.

I watched her struggle to swallow as much of my cum as possible while her eyes were still locked on mine. Almost as if she thought me her savior. Almost as if she wanted… *this*.

Mine.

The simple word resonated with me with such blinding force that I knew I’d fight anyone and anything to keep her with me forever. She was all fucking mine.

I pulled out, some of my cum dribbling down her lips and chin, and her tongue darted out, licking it clean while still staring at me.

I’d known it all along, this woman was my perfect match.

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FIFTY-ONE

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PHOENIX

Dante came down my throat, and it felt empowering. After a few seconds, he withdrew from my mouth until just the tip remained.

I stared up at him, letting him see how he'd wrecked me… in more ways than one.

He swiped at my tear-streaked face, watching me with an affection that made my heart twist. That was how easy it was for me to fall for him all over again. I fought it, like a bird caught in its gilded cage, but I was smart enough to know when to throw in the towel.

My throat was raw and sore, and my bare breasts ached for his touch. Slipping from my mouth, he helped me to my feet and then tucked himself into his pants while I watched him through half-lidded eyes.

I had no idea why I'd gotten down on my knees for him.

Or maybe I did but I didn't want to admit it to myself. My breathing became a chore and I had to remind myself to inhale and exhale. Goosebumps erupted on my skin at his proximity and the possibility of having his mouth on me.

It was all it took to be back under his spell… one day. My stupid heart wanted to leap out of my chest and burrow into his big, strong hands.

I'd handed him my heart on a silver platter five years ago, only for him to betray me when I needed him the most.

Yet here I was, on my knees, blowing him. Someone needed to hit me upside the head and knock some sense into me.

Then, without warning, he kissed me. Hard. Desperate. My lips parted and his tongue thrust inside, claiming me savagely. Shock and warmth erupted in my chest and I moaned, wrapping my arms around his neck. He

tasted so good, just as I remembered it. We kissed without any reservations, like I was *his*.

Like he did five years ago.

Don't think about that. The whispers were there, warning me, but my want made me ignore them all. Just this once. Just for a little bit. I'd use him to extinguish this loneliness that had been eating at me for the last several months. Years, really.

My sensitive nipples brushed against his shirt, bringing us flush with one another. They tightened under the heat of his chest and sparks lit beneath my skin. His heart was thundering in sync with mine, hard and fast.

I hadn't felt this alive since the last time he kissed me.

His mouth trailed down my throat, following the curve where my neck and shoulder met, then he sucked and nipped, and I felt it between my thighs. I rubbed against him, needing him inside me.

To hell with pride. To hell with everything.

I'd take what I wanted in this one stolen moment. After all, all my orgasms started and ended with Dante Leone.

As if he sensed my surrender, he lifted me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. Walking me to the bed, he held me tightly, as if he were scared I'd vanish. He dropped me on the comforter and my breasts bounced from the impact. His hand traced my naked skin from my cheek down to my ribs, coming back up to cup my breast and squeeze.

Pleasure blazed through me and straight to my core.

It had been so long, I knew it wouldn't take long for my pleasure to build.

He rubbed a thumb across my nipple and my back arched with a steep exhale.

His fingers hooked on my waistband and he pulled my pants and underwear down my thighs, leaving me completely naked.

The awareness captured my next breath, and he dipped his head and kissed my inner thigh before sucking on the sensitive flesh. He licked me from my entrance to my clit. I moaned, my fingers digging into his scalp and gripping his hair. I felt his groan vibrate against me and deep in my core.

I wanted to beg him to take off his shirt so I could feel his muscles under my palms, but the moment his tongue thrust inside me, I forgot all

about it. I moaned, scraping my nails over his scalp, feeling the burn of his stubble against my heat, and I knew I needed more of him.

He ran a rough hand down my leg and hooked it over his shoulder, spreading me wide. I should have felt embarrassed, but I didn't. I was too far gone. He thrust his tongue inside me. *In and out.* Again and again.

Fisting a handful of his hair, I moved my hips as he worked me, desperate to find my release. He nipped my clit, *hard,* then growled with some dark, sadistic satisfaction that I felt in the pressure of his fingers on my hips. He sucked my clit, his hot, wet mouth setting every cell of me on fire.

The sensation twisted and curled as he drew out my release. I let out a needy huff, grinding harder still into his mouth, trying to tell him where I needed his attention. But he ignored me, taking his sweet time licking and sucking.

The embers of my desire burned brighter. I was rocking my hips, chasing the orgasm until I felt my muscles tighten. He moved one hand to my throat and squeezed lightly while he continued to thrust his tongue inside my pussy.

It was all I needed.

I squeezed my eyes shut as the pressure detonated. My body trembled against him as it washed over me. It went on and on, the languid sensation pulling taut until I was nothing but putty under his touch.

My eyes fluttered open to find his gaze on me with such reverence, it made my fragile heart tremble.

He kissed my inner thigh and trailed up my stomach and over my sensitive breasts. My skin sizzled again, an empty ache forming low in my stomach.

His mouth came to mine and he groaned. He slipped his tongue in, and I could taste myself against his lips.

As he pulled my bottom lip between his teeth, I reached for his shirt, trying to undo the buttons, but he stopped me by grabbing my wrist.

I tried to work myself free, but he wouldn't budge. He wouldn't let me touch him, and all the while I lay there naked and on display.

I pulled away, frowning, and found his eyes.

"It's staying on." His expression was harsh, ghosts I didn't understand hovering in his eyes, but I didn't pause to think about it. I jumped to my feet and grabbed my clothes, feeling humiliated and betrayed all over again.

The worst part was that *I* had let it happen.

Once dressed, I stumbled out of the room, my pride in pieces. Dante followed closely behind me, but I refused to acknowledge him. I made my way toward Skye's room, scolding myself for getting lost in lust while my daughter was one door down.

He grabbed my wrist just as I touched the doorknob.

I whirled around. "*What?*" I signed, clearly agitated. I noted he put a dinner jacket on, making him appear darker and formal. All traces of the passionate man gone.

We stared at each other in a silent battle of wills. His jaw flexed and my temper blazed, threatening to explode.

"I'm sorry." My heart stilled as confusion flickered through me at his apology. But that wasn't what tugged at my heart. It was the anguished look in his eyes. He took a tentative step, closing the distance between us. I smelled his cologne, familiarity making my lungs pinch with every breath. "I missed you, dandelion."

My throat felt tight as warmth swarmed my chest, but hesitation and distrust had already taken root. My stomach twisted as whispers warned. *Don't trust him. He'll break you again. Even worse, he'll break Skye's heart.*

He chose Reina over me. He found me lacking. He didn't pick me. *Again.* My eyes burned, but I wouldn't cry in front of him. It was humiliating enough that I'd let myself be vulnerable and become lost in lust.

"*Skye will be hungry soon*," I signed.

"Fiancé" or not, Dante Leone could go fuck himself.

The mouth-watering aroma of onions and garlic and spices drifted through the air as we made our way down the stairs and into the dining room. The long mahogany table that seated at least twenty people was full of food. Dishes overflowing with seafood pasta, bread, artichokes, lamb, veggies, prosciutto, and tiramisu were placed on the table.

Cesar was already seated and shot to his feet when we entered. He tilted his head in greeting, his eyes lowered to Skye with exaggerated surprise.

“And who do we have here?” he questioned with a raised brow.

Skye met his stare, not shying away. She was brave—braver than I was at her age. Cesar might not be wearing his unhinged ruthlessness on his sleeve like Dante, but there was no mistaking him for an average Joe.

Dante twisted our daughter’s pigtail strand around his finger, smiling softly. “This is Skye. She’s our kid.”

My heart fluttered in my chest as I read the words that just left from his mouth. He had no idea just how true they were.

“Well, surprise, surprise,” Cesar drawled. “I didn’t see that one coming.”

The comment was odd, and judging by Dante’s pinched eyebrows, he thought so too.

“*Does Cesar know ASL*?” I questioned Dante.

“Barely.” Dante flicked a glance at his right-hand man. “Cesar and ASL are like two right hands and two left feet.”

Cesar rolled his eyes. “I’m going to learn it. You just wait and see.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at Cesar’s enthusiasm. “*You will*,” I signed and Dante translated. “*For now, just speak slowly so we can read lips.*”

“Duly noted.” I liked Cesar already.

“All right, everyone,” Dante announced, pulling a chair out for both me and Skye. “We have a big day tomorrow, and I want us all to be ready for it. Let’s eat.” Skye nodded eagerly and my own stomach grumbled in response. “I’m starving,” he declared, taking a seat to my left and directly opposite of Skye at the long dinner table.

Skye reached for bread, oblivious to the tension between Dante and me. “*Me too.*”

We began serving ourselves while the cook carved the lamb.

Cesar’s eyes kept darting from Dante to me to Skye, only to repeat the motion. “How old is Skye?” he finally asked. She’d read his lips and lifted five fingers. Something passed his expression, but he quickly masked it. “And when is your birthday?”

She signed, and Dante translated. “December. New Year’s Eve.”

Dread and suspicion pooled in my stomach. Did he know? It couldn’t be. I knew Cesar had been around five years ago, but we’d never crossed

paths. Not that I remembered, anyhow, and he wasn't exactly a man I'd forget.

I met his gaze, and it was then that I knew without a doubt. Cesar knew Skye was Dante's.

Dante leaned back in his chair with his jacket unbuttoned, studying me. He didn't even bother being subtle about it. Cesar, on the other hand, studied me with a different kind of interest. It was almost uneasy.

"Everything set for tomorrow?" Dante asked.

"I'm picking up the package tonight," Cesar replied, and my brows pinched. *What package?*

Dante smiled broadly. "I knew they'd be able to accommodate me."

Cesar rolled his eyes. "It's more like they're scared."

Silverware glinted under the chandelier and candlelight. Skye and Dante ate all the same dishes, strategically avoiding the greens.

"*At least have some peas*," I insisted.

The look they both aimed at me would have been comical if not for the similarities in their expressions. I reached for my glass of wine and took a gulp, a bead of sweat rolling ominously down my back.

I watched them eat, suddenly seeing it all too clearly. The way they held their spoons. The way they tilted their heads side to side while chewing. The way they sipped their water with their eyes closed.

When they looked up at me with almost identical expressions, I realized my daughter didn't have my eyes. She had Dante's. His mannerisms. His expressions. Even his mouth.

Once they were done eating, Skye gingerly reached for tiramisu while Dante rolled a cigarette between his fingers.

"*Don't smoke around her,*" I warned him.

He lowered his gaze to the cigarette, his fingers never ceasing the movement. He tapped it on the table, his attention settling on me.

"I'll quit," he said, watching me with a darkly entertained expression. "You're right. It's not good for *our* family." My stomach tightened, detecting a hidden meaning but not quite comprehending what he meant. "I still want the name, Nix."

My heartbeat fluttered, suddenly understanding the meaning. I had hoped he'd forgotten, but it was foolish to think that.

"Whose name?" Cesar asked, and I shrugged while Dante ignored him. "How is your sister doing?" Cesar tried to change subjects, watching me

with an amused expression.

Guilt slithered through me. The truth was that I had no idea. I hadn't spoken to my sister in months. I hadn't asked Dante about her and Amon in fear he'd figure out I was faking this whole amnesia thing. I was starting to think it wasn't the wisest move on my part.

Finding Skye had eased some of my pain, but it wasn't enough to take away from how much I missed her. I was desperate to share the news of her niece with her and tell her everything I'd kept from her. But I couldn't. Not with the knowledge that it could potentially put her in danger with the Nikolaevs.

"Phoenix has amnesia," Dante answered on my behalf, as if that explained everything.

Cesar stared at me in outright disbelief. I was on edge, waiting for him to call me out, and after almost a full minute of silence, he finally broke it.

"So now we have two with the same problem, huh?" He turned his attention to Skye. "You and me, kiddo. We'll have to fix this shit. Mark my words," he said slowly so she could read his lips.

Two people with amnesia? That was the most bizarre comment. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask what he meant, but Dante shot Cesar a dark look that promised retribution, and I knew I'd get nothing else out of either one of them.

So I did the only thing I knew how to do. I remained silent.

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FIFTY-TWO

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DANTE

Last night’s dinner was a close call.

Cesar almost revealed my amnesia to Phoenix. It made me want to shoot him on the spot. I wasn’t ready to divulge it. There’d be questions that would follow, and I wasn’t ready to go down that path.

Cesar stood by my side in the little family chapel on the estate that married the last five generations of my mother’s family.

I stood at the front of the chapel, waiting for Phoenix and Skye to show up, while Cesar droned on, apparently unaware of my growing irritation with him.

“Should I keep your funeral a secret too?” Cesar asked casually, tilting his head pensively as if contemplating something before he continued. “Maybe I could get plastic surgery to look like you… All I would need to do is act like an ass and voilà! I’m Dante Leone.” He raised his hands up to midair and wiggled all of his fingers dramatically.

I gritted my teeth, wishing the priest wasn’t already here so I could punch Cesar. He could still serve as our witness with a black eye.

Fuck, it could be that I was nervous. My exchange with Nix last night rubbed me the wrong way. But when she suggested she could run, agitation flared in me and I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

It was a mistake. I came off too strong. The last thing she needed was me suffocating her. Except, I’d tasted her. We were so close to making it official and I couldn’t risk losing her.

I rolled my shoulders. We needed to get to that “I do” moment *right the fuck now*.

Cesar sighed and ran a hand through his hair, continuing his idiotic rambling.

“Bedroom duties might be difficult though. Phoenix is beautiful, but not my type.” I tensed, red-hot fury rushing through me as I turned to face him. He took in my expression and smirked knowingly. “What?” he challenged.

I had no fucking idea what he was going on about, but I knew I wasn’t in the mood for it.

“Fuck off,” I snapped. “And not another word or I’ll shoot you.”

He chuckled. “Wait until I fulfill my best man duties first.”

I turned to face forward, ignoring him. As if on cue, music started to play. Three years led to this. To *her.* Yes, there had been bumps along the way in the form of a gunshot wound and a worldwide manhunt and a surprise child… but who was I to let minor hiccups hold me back?

The doors swung open, everything faded away, and I pulled in an anxious breath.

Phoenix appeared at the end of the aisle with Skye in front of her, and I pushed all the air out of my lungs. She was perfect. She paused mid-step, her eyes finding mine, and I forced myself not to move when all I wanted was to rush to her.

The wedding dress was beautiful because she wore it. It was difficult, but not impossible, to procure a designer gown in the matter of two days, but I could be quite convincing when I wanted to be. Vera Wang learned that firsthand.

I took Phoenix’s palm in mine as Skye took the spot beside her, both of them smiling. I wrapped my fingers around Nix’s hand and held on to her tightly, my eyes trailing over the delicate lines of her face.

“You look breathtaking.” She focused on my lips, and the tension eased from her shoulders. She even offered me a shy but genuine smile.

We both faced the priest. The interpreter stood next to him so Nix and Skye could follow. I was unable to keep the grin off my face. This—she—was all I ever wanted.

The priest started the ceremony. “We are gathered here today to witness the union of Phoenix Romero and Dante Leone.”

I tightened my grip and drew circles across the back of Phoenix’s hand with my thumb, seeking comfort from it and hopefully providing some for her too.

This was always meant to be.

The priest spoke about *commitment* and *respect* and who knew what else until he called for the exchange of the rings. *Finally!* I'd had the rings stored for the past three years in anticipation of this very moment. As I slid the diamond-encrusted titanium band onto her finger, relief washed over me with such force that I struggled to breathe for a moment.

It fit her perfectly. Dainty. Beautiful. Strong.

She looked me in the eyes with surprise. "It's lighter," I mouthed. "So it doesn't bother you when you're playing music."

The corners of her lips tipped up and it took all my self-restraint not to bend my head and kiss her.

She slid my band onto my finger, and much to my delight, her fingers weren't shaking. She was coming to terms with this. With us.

"You may now kiss the bride," the priest announced.

I took a step closer to her and gently cupped her cheek before dropping my forehead to hers. "This is it," I whispered, ensuring she could read my lips. "From this moment on, you're my wife. Mine to care for, mine to cherish, and mine to protect."

I leaned in, my lips brushing against hers, and the moment they touched, my control slipped. I yanked her closer, threading my hand through her thick mane and kissing her with everything I had.

She moaned into my mouth, and I deepened our kiss. This kiss was my vow. She was mine and I was hers. She was my fire, my water, my air, my life. From this day forward, she and her daughter were my reasons for being.

My everything.

Taking in her flushed cheeks and her lust-filled blue eyes, I couldn't help but smirk.

This was our forever.

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FIFTY-THREE

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PHOENIX

The silence after the wedding was different from the one I was accustomed to. It was thoughtful. Unbreakable. Full of turmoil. There were way too many secrets plaguing this fragile union.

It was only lunchtime when we got to the castle.

Skye and Cesar hung by the open terrace as she tried to teach him ASL. Donatella, the nanny, hung out with them too, informing us that the cook had lunch and dinner ready. Dante and I joined them on the terrace, and for the next several hours, we were a normal family. *Almost.* Minus the guards outside. Minus the guns.

Okay, maybe not so normal.

The table on the terrace was full of food and a wedding cake with two little figures that resembled Dante and me—me with dark hair, not fake red. It turned out to be a pleasant afternoon, although I wished for my sister and friends to be here with us. We remained seated on the terrace for hours, enjoying the pleasant company and entertained by Skye and Donatella bossing Cesar around.

The sun glinted off Dante's wedding band and my eyes flickered to my own. It was beautiful, and so light that I barely felt it. He'd put some thought into this wedding, and that fact alone tugged at my heart.

The sun was lowering rapidly over the horizon when Dante headed for the minibar. I slipped off my heels and kicked them to the side, then made my way to him.

I tried hard to keep my walls intact for years around him, but inch by inch, he was chipping at them.

Bracing a hand on the bar, he turned around and watched me, a smile pulling on his lips. But his gaze… It burned like a lit match. A shiver ran down my back and I hoped at the end of it all, I'd survive this man.

"*Do I get a drink?*" I asked.

He pulled the top off a whiskey decanter and poured another glass, handing it to me and letting his fingers dance over mine.

Goosebumps trailed down my bare arms at the contact. I tilted my head back and downed the drink in one go, then set it down beside him.

He ran a hand across his jaw, his eyes never wavering. "You're not going to need to drink to deal with me, are you?"

Stepping into his space, I gripped the end of his tie. "*And if I do?*" I drew his scent deep into my lungs. My caution seemed to have gone with the wind. It was stupid. *Reckless*.

His body stilled for a split second, but he must have read something in my eyes. A mixture of vulnerability, worry, and desire. The truth was that I *wanted* him, but I didn't want to be a replacement. I needed him to want me and only me. I wanted a family that was different from the one we grew up in. Maybe the one I had before Mamma and Papà moved to Italy.

"I guess I'm going to have to help you overcome that addiction," he said slowly, signing the words at the same time. "You can only have one." He grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me into his chest. He tilted my head up and kissed me until I was dizzy, tasting the whiskey on his tongue. My pulse throbbed between my legs and lust burned through my blood. "I'm going to be your addiction. The same way you're mine."

My heart raced in my chest. He already was my addiction. There was no sense in denying it or fighting it. A tight sensation wrapped around me, recognizing the signs.

It was like free-falling.

He skimmed his lips across the pulse point in my neck and the ice around my heart melted faster than chocolate under the scorching sun. Another section of my walls came tumbling down.

It was too soon. He'd wreck me and leave me bleeding. Just like before.

The vise around my heart tightened, tugging in that familiar way, but my desire won out. My mind was made up. I'd make the best of whatever time we had.

Cesar and Skye appeared, breaking the moment. Dante's heavy gaze tore from me and met our daughter's.

“*Can Cesar and Donatella take me to the beach?*” Excitement lurked in her eyes. “*He says it’s right in front of the castle.*”

My eyes met Cesar’s and I found a solemn promise in them. He’d lay his life down for her because he knew my secret. How, I had no idea, but it banished any concern for her safety.

“I’ll put her to bed afterward,” Donatella offered, signing. “That way you two can have some privacy.”

“*Sure*,” I agreed, ignoring the way my cheeks heated at the insinuation.

Skye looked at Dante and said with all the seriousness of a five-year-old. “*Cesar said he’s your guard. Can he be mine now?*”

I choked out a laugh, but what surprised me the most was Dante’s agreement. “He’s yours, princess.”

The nickname had me wincing. Sasha called her a princess too. But it couldn’t be more than a coincidence. Skye *was* a princess. She reminded me of Reina in that way.

“*Have fun at the beach*,” I signed.

Dante watched me as the two figures disappeared. The vehemence in his gaze reminded me of a few days ago when he’d said, *There’s nowhere you could go that I wouldn’t find you*.

Maybe I should fight him, but I was tired of fighting. Instead, rising to my tiptoes, I pressed my lips to his jawline. His stubble was rough as I kissed a line down his throat, growing dizzy from his taste and smell.

I rested my hand over his hard-on, rubbing the entire length of him. He took my mouth in a wet and rough kiss, my tongue sliding against his.

His grip on the back of my neck tightened and the throbbing intensified in my lower belly as I pressed my body to his. He was nothing but heat, sculpted muscles, and lust.

He groaned against my lips before grabbing my hips and lifting me. My legs wrapped around his waist and my hands buried in his hair. Walking toward the stairs, he kissed me like he was dying of thirst and I was his only source of water.

He trailed his mouth down my neck and I worked on his vest and then his shirt buttons. His hands kneaded my ass as I tugged his white undershirt out of his pants and ran my hands over the hot skin of his stomach beneath it. He hissed through his teeth, and a lungful of air escaped me when he dropped on top of me on the bed.

When I looked up and found the ghosts in his gaze, I froze in place.

God, not this again.

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FIFTY-FOUR

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DANTE

The lust on Nix's face from mere seconds ago was replaced with annoyance as she watched me, propping herself up on her elbows. I was majorly messing this up.

I wanted to tell her it was better she never saw my body, but fuck if I knew how to start explaining something I couldn't remember. Besides, I didn't want to see the disgust on her face once my scars were exposed.

The beast inside me was leashed, but the fears weren't.

"Tomorrow we leave for our honeymoon," I said, knowing there were so many more important things to discuss.

She sat up, pulling her knees to her chest, her wedding dress pooling around her. "*I'm not leaving Skye.*"

I expected that. "She's coming too."

Her delicate eyebrows pinched as she tilted her head, studying me. "*Isn't that strange?*"

I shrugged. "We make our own rules, dandelion. The three of us will dance through life together and nobody will stop us."

Something passed through her expression, but she quickly masked it. "*Where are we going?*" she signed.

"Lake Tahoe."

She winced, her face turning a few shades paler.

Resting my knee on the mattress, I reached for her and raked my fingers through her hair while my other hand snaked around her waist and tightened. "What are you hiding from me?"

The hypocrisy didn't escape me. I demanded to know what she was hiding but was unwilling to reveal my own secrets.

Her lips thinned and her palms came to press against my chest. "*Nothing*."

"I want all of you, Nix. I need you to trust me in every single way."

She looked at me with such vulnerability in her eyes that I heard the crack of my heart. Tension coiled beneath my skin, and I wanted to give in and have a cigarette. Let my lungs burn and nicotine spread through my veins so I could relax.

But I'd thrown all of them away. I wanted to keep my word.

"*I'm already yours.*" She put her hand between us, the diamonds on her ring finger glimmering under the low light. "*See*." I couldn't distinguish from her expression whether she was scolding me about it or just stating a fact.

My fingers moved up from her waist, over her ribs, until they were tracing the underside of her breasts.

"No. Not yet." I cupped her face, my thumb brushing over her lips. "But you will be. You'll learn to trust me."

"*Not before you trust me*."

In all honesty, she had a point. She was a part of my every thought, every breath, every fucking heartbeat. I was in so deep, I didn't think I could find my way out. But then there was this fucking fear that once she touched my scarred flesh, she'd let her imagination run wild and abandon me out of uncertainty.

Truthfully, my own mind did the same thing and often shut down following that train of thought. It was a lose-lose situation.

"I want you brunette," I whispered, rubbing my thumb over her soft bottom lip, tabling the discussion of my demons for now.

Her lips parted, and my dick stiffened painfully when her tongue darted out to lick my finger. She looked so fucking sexy with her hair tousled and falling down her back, still wearing her wedding dress.

"*I want you naked*," she signed with a pout, her expression stubborn. I stiffened, unsure where to go from here. If I showed her my scars, she'd be repulsed by them. If I didn't show them to her, I'd risk losing her.

"You're all I've been thinking and dreaming about," I whispered.

She leaned in hesitantly, her lips brushing against the edge of mine. The moment our lips touched, my groan vibrated through my chest. Her tongue tangled with mine and my cock twitched. Her hands roamed over my chest and biceps with the same need and urgency I was feeling.

She moaned, her hands lowering down my body and cupping my erection, and my control snapped. I pushed against her shoulder, making her fall back onto our bed. The outline of her breasts pushed against the thin material of her dress.

She was panting, her lips slightly swollen, and she'd never looked more beautiful. I leaned over her, my cock pressing right against her pussy as I held myself up on my forearms.

Her moan traveled between us and her eyelids were heavy and searching.

My lips brushed against hers just before I kissed her deeply. She felt so fucking amazing against me, her small body fitting against my large frame perfectly. I thrust my hips into her and she moaned into my mouth. Her back arched off the bed and she hooked her leg around my hip.

I groaned when her small hand pushed against my chest, pulling away slightly to look at her.

She tipped her chin toward my shirt, instructing me to take it off. Fuck, I'd hoped she'd be distracted enough to forget about my shirt. Maybe I should turn her over on her hands and knees and fuck her into oblivion.

I knew it wouldn't work. I knew it by the jut of her chin and the gleam in her eyes. Besides, it felt wrong to keep my deepest secret from her.

She was my wife now and she deserved to know. Truthfully, she should have heard about it before I'd tied her to me for the rest of our lives.

She pushed me off, and my cock tented in my pants. I ran a trembling hand through my hair. Fuck, I wanted her to like me. Love me. And this—

I swallowed hard, meeting her wide-eyed gaze.

"You might not like what you see." She shook her head, confusion clear on her face. "Ah, fuck it."

Her eyes grew wider with each inch of exposed skin until I discarded the shirt. Her soft gasp might as well have been as loud as the church bells.

"*What happened to you?*" Her hands trembled so badly she could barely sign. She shifted onto her knees and crawled to the edge of the bed. I groaned inwardly, my cock stiffening painfully at the images of her soft, plump lips taking my dick between them. Still on her knees, she lifted her fingers and hovered them over the scars—ugly, shining stripes marring my torso—as if she couldn't bring herself to touch them.

"They're ugly, I know," I mouthed. "You don't have to touch them."

“*They are not ugly*,” she protested, mouthing the words while her fingers connected with my skin and she started tracing them one by one. “*Who did this to you?*”

I shook my head. “I don’t remember.” When she gave me a questioning look, I continued, “Five years ago, I was kidnapped. Ended up losing my memory. Some of it came back. Some of it didn’t.” Her face went pale and she covered her mouth. I let out a low laugh, hoping she wouldn’t see how much her reaction affected me. “Sorry I can’t be perfect for you.”

Her delicate neck bobbed as she swallowed and her eyes glistened, her bottom lip trembling. Something changed at that moment. I couldn’t pinpoint what, but her expression softened and she wrapped her arms around me. Her warm lips touched my torso, and then to my shock, I realized she was kissing my scars.

I tried my hardest to calm my raging cock so I could think clearly. Was this pity?

I cupped her face and tugged her back so she’d look at me. “Don’t pity me.”

She reached for my hand, entwining our fingers. “*I don’t. I just want to… love you.*”

My fucking heart stopped before it jump-started into turbo mode.

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FIFTY-FIVE

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PHOENIX

Finally, I understood. I'd fucked up majorly, but I didn't want to ruin this night with confessions. They'd come, and my sixth sense was telling me it'd be sooner versus later.

Dante didn't ignore me for all those years. He was kidnapped, tortured, and then suffered amnesia, and all I had done since he'd come back into my life was fight him at every turn.

My fingers drifted over his torso lightly, feeling every scar as if it were my own. I thought he'd betrayed me, when all along, he was battling his own hidden demons. My hand hovered over the scar I gave him, and my heart froze. A tattoo covered the flesh there, and I stared at it with my mouth hanging open.

Fuck, I hurt him. The knowledge settled over me. His darkness had always been there, hidden behind his playfulness.

I met his gaze, pools of insecurity swirling in his eyes as he readied for rejection, and I felt my chest tear apart.

I straightened up on my knees and kissed him. I rubbed myself against his warmth, my hands roaming his flesh greedily.

A rumble resounded as our tongues tangled, and then I pulled away, delirious from the taste of him. He pushed my hair to one side, pressing his face into my neck, and a shudder rippled through me.

The press of his lips against the hollow of my neck stole my every thought. He traced the sting with a lick, his touch possessive, but for once, it didn't terrify me.

I touched his neck, trailing my fingers across to his collarbone, and hovered over his mouth, teasing the breath between us. I caressed him with

my nose, forehead, and hands, my tongue dying to reach beyond my lips and taste him. I pressed my chest into his, and he gripped my waist harder.

Then, without a warning, he pushed me back against the mattress, settling between my legs and hooking my thighs around his shoulders, his lips seconds from my pussy.

He dragged his nose across my inner thigh, making me quiver. His teeth grazed over my panties. Another shiver and he ripped my panties right at the crotch, the flimsy fabric tearing with ease.

He dragged his tongue over my pussy, and his eyes lifted and locked with mine.

“Dante…”

His name left my lips with a sound I couldn’t hear but judging by the look flashing in his eyes, he enjoyed it. He pulled back, his chin glistening with my arousal.

“Again.” I blinked in confusion. “Say my name again.”

I shook my head, a tremor rolling through me as he circled my clit with his tongue again. He dragged his tongue down and pushed into me, tongue-fucking my pussy.

He pulled away a little, showering my inner thigh with kisses before he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and mouthed, “Give me what I want.”

I looked into his eyes, seeing the boy I fell in love with five years ago. His hand came between my legs, his thumb brushing over my pussy, and I bucked under his touch, sensitive everywhere.

“Dante,” I pleaded, my breathing harsh. I tightened my legs around his shoulders and arched my pussy into his face. He leaned in, giving me what I needed and wanted from the moment we’d crossed paths again.

His fingers pumped into me as his tongue started to stroke my clit, his movements rhythmic and firm.

I watched him through a haze of need as he dove into my pussy like his survival depended on it. He sucked on my clit, pumping his fingers in and out of me. And just like that, I fell apart, coming on his tongue as an orgasm consumed me.

He continued licking at my sensitive pussy until every shiver subsided.

My eyes opened to meet his satisfied smirk and he gently placed my legs down.

“You’re beautiful when you come for me.”

My cheeks heated at his words. “*Will you fuck me now? Please?*”

His hands on the waistband of his trousers, he pushed them down along his muscular legs, exposing his thick cock. In one swift move, he ripped my dress, leaving me indecently exposed.

“I like ripping your clothes off,” he said, his gaze hot and lazy on me.

I bit down on my lip, my thighs trembling with fresh need that I knew only he could temper. I ran my hands up his chest, over his neck, into his thick hair, and down his biceps.

Five years and it all led to this. He was the only man I’d ever wanted. I watched him reach for the condom and roll it on, the sight turning me on.

Grabbing my hips, he pulled me closer, his thick cock pushing against my entrance. I met his eyes as he pushed the tip into me, and I groaned, my arms wrapping around his neck. His eyes were steady pools of dark blue, pulling me into their depths. He bent his head, pressing his lips against mine and kissing me tenderly before pulling back with a long, deep lick.

Then he kissed a path down my neck and over my collarbone until he reached my breast. When he captured a nipple in his mouth, white lights burst behind my eyes. His other hand squeezed one breast while he licked and nipped the other.

I was so desperate that I would have done *anything* to have him inside me right now. As if he read my mind, he pushed his length halfway inside me.

I gasped and my thighs quivered as I tried to adjust to his size. It’d been too long for me. His hands came to my hips.

My eyes shot to his and I gave my head a light shake as I dug my nails into his biceps.

“All of it, dandelion,” he commanded with a clenched jaw.

One of his hands left my hip and came between us, reaching for my clit. He rubbed it in a circular motion, and then his mouth found my breasts again. I shuddered and moaned as I started rocking against his length.

His grip on my hip became bruising, tension radiating from him.

I sought out his lips, and the moment our lips connected, he thrust all the way to the hilt.

His heartbeat raced against mine as our bodies came together in more ways than one.

I pressed my face into his neck and he started moving slowly, thrusting his hips inside me. He was shaking, keeping his desire leashed.

Finding his eyes, I mouthed, "*Don't hold back*." I wanted his everything. I *needed* it.

He didn't need to be told again. In the next breath, his hands were everywhere. Grabbing fistfuls of my hair to angle me the way he wanted, kissing me hard and gripping my hips to thrust harder, deeper. He nipped my neck and throat, never breaking the rhythm as he slid in and out of me, pounding into me. *Hard.* My moans and whimpers vibrated in my throat.

He wasn't giving me a single break from the assault. It was too much. Not enough. It all felt devastatingly good.

His pelvis ground against my clit and I came so hard spots flew behind my eyes. The fire inside me burst, spreading a tingling sensation throughout my body and leaving a languid sensation of heat behind. He swallowed my moan in his mouth, and with a punishing last thrust, he shuddered above me while I held on to him.

He slumped on top of me, the warmth of his body a heavy blanket, and my eyelids grew heavy.

For the first time in years, I felt content. I pressed my face into his neck and breathed him in. There was nothing but us and Skye and our future.

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FIFTY-SIX

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DANTE

Nix tried to remain awake, but it was useless. She fell asleep with me still buried deep inside her, and for the first time in my life, it felt like it was exactly where I should be.

I pulled out of her, careful not to wake her. I went to the bathroom and returned with a wet towel to clean her up. Then I lifted her up, pulled off the ruined sheets, and wrapped her in the thick duvet.

After ensuring she was comfortable, I slid into the bed next to her and kept her close. I knew sleep wouldn't find me, not until I was physically and mentally exhausted. Deep sleep had evaded me for… five years or so. It was the need to always be fully aware of my surroundings, ready to spring into action.

I'd never allow myself to be captured and tortured again. As I lay there next to my wife, open and more vulnerable than I could ever remember, that feeling from the hospital came back—the lingering thought that I had lost something irrevocably important.

The scent of spring rain lingered all around me and I stared up at the ceiling, letting my mind wander into oblivion.

My vision started to blur, past and present colliding as the memories closed in.

I was happy. The happiest I'd ever been.

It had to be illegal to feel this way. We hadn't talked about either of our fathers, but I knew I was ready to take her and make her mine. I had enough from my inheritance from my birth mother to allow us to live comfortably for the rest of our lives.

Our days were filled with happiness and hope for the future, but we hadn't discussed any of the details. Not yet.

Amon kept asking what was holding me up. I made up some bullshit story about searching for new vineyards. He bought it because he knew the droughts from the last year had majorly hindered production. And I sent Cesar home, much to his dismay. I didn't want anyone to know about Phoenix Romero yet. Not until we made things official.

I checked my watch as I sat on my bike, waiting for her. Nix should be coming out any time now, sneaking out of her boarding school outside Lake Tahoe. We'd coordinated her classes with my business meetings, and we had a good routine going. We always left our late afternoons and evenings open for each other.

But this time, we'd have the entire weekend to ourselves. It had taken some scheming, but it would be worth it. Her school believed she was visiting home, and she told her sister she was going away for a workshop with her music program. It helped that Reina took extra classes so she could graduate early. And I… Well, I had nobody to answer to.

The two of us at my cabin at Lake Tahoe sounded almost too good to be true.

The familiar petite brunette, wearing skintight yoga pants and an oversized yellow sweater, came into view. I grinned and jumped off my bike.

She waved from across the parking lot, and even from here, I could see the way her eyes shimmered with affection.

It never got old, seeing her at the end of the day. Even if it was sometimes just for five minutes, it soothed me. I relished the quality time. She ran up to me and I caught her as she jumped into my arms.

Yeah, this would never ever get old.

Her legs wrapped around my waist and I spun us around as my lips found hers. She moaned against my mouth, her body moving against mine as I kissed her, taking my time and savoring each kiss. I eventually set her down, happily dazed.

"Hop on," I told her as I handed her a helmet and moved to straddle the leather seat. She got on behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist tightly. I revved the engine and she glued herself against me, her soft curves molding against my hard back. I loved taking her out on rides, with nothing but the wind in our hair and the sun in our faces, we connected on a different level.

I always took the long way to my cabin when I rode the bike, so when we finally pulled up, I had to tap her hand lightly to make sure she hadn't fallen asleep strapped to me like a koala.

Once I parked, she hopped down and stretched her legs, taking in the cabin and its surroundings with an awed expression.

I watched her with awe of my own before I could no longer stand the lack of proximity. I closed the distance between us and lifted her lithe body, throwing her over my shoulder and giving her ass a squeeze. She shrieked and laughed as she tried to wriggle away, and my lips curved into a wide smile.

"I love you, my Nix," I murmured against her lips. We'd unpacked and were now exploring each other's bodies in the master suite, a fire roaring and the plush comforter beneath us. I pulled away a bit, studying her soft features, and signed, "I love you." I would never tire of saying those three little words.

I had just started learning ASL and could say only a handful of words, but I intended to remedy that. I'd learn it back to front.

"I love you too," Phoenix signed, then captured my bottom lip between her teeth.

She threaded her hands through my hair and gripped tightly, her touch possessive as she deepened our kiss. Her hands soon slipped under my T-shirt. I didn't know if we were moving in fast or slow motion, all I knew was that I needed her.

We'd spend the rest of our lives together, so I could wait for as long as she needed. We'd build a solid foundation and the two of us would be nothing like our fucked-up parents.

I tore my lips away reluctantly and dropped my forehead to hers, my breathing ragged.

"Make yourself comfortable," I mouthed. "I'm going to take a quick shower."

A cold one, because my dick was as hard as steel.

She nodded, smiling softly, and I pressed one more kiss on her lips before disappearing into the bathroom.

My cock throbbed painfully, demanding I take her. I had never wanted a woman as I had her. Yes, I could appreciate a woman's body, but the thought of going all the way without a deeper emotional connection would always leave a bad taste in my mouth, so I'd never done it. And I knew

Phoenix had never given herself to a man fully before, which meant it was more important than anything else that I got it right.

With her, it was all I could think about. So, I ensured we took our time, taking it slow and experiencing each part of our relationship. It wasn't easy to wait, but it'd be worth it in the end. Phoenix deserved romancing, wining and dining. She deserved the world.

I closed my eyes and remembered the two of us in the field of dandelions, images of her beautiful smile and big blue eyes. Her lips on mine as her soft body pushed against me. The way she grinded against me. She felt so fucking good.

And the little noises she made. Fuck!

I fisted my cock and began pumping up and down when the door to the bathroom opened and I froze, my hand still wrapped around my length.

Phoenix came to stand beside me, her eyes traveling over my naked body and her lips curled into a playful smile.

"Can I help you with that?" she mouthed, licking her bottom lip as she eyed my hand fisting my cock.

Before I could find the words, she'd shed her clothes and was stepping into the shower. I could tell by her expression that she was nervous, but her touch was sure when she placed her palms flat against my chest.

She smiled up at me and my heart started to race. She inhaled a deep breath and then removed all the space between us until not even the water from the shower could slip through. I wrapped my arms around her, pulled her against me, and pressed my cock against her stomach. God, even that felt unbelievable.

The girl of my dreams was in front of me, wet and naked, her breasts glistening and her eyes eager. She was so fucking beautiful; she had no idea how much power she held over me.

I turned us both around and pressed her back against the tile. I watched goose bumps break out over her delicate skin as the steam from the shower created a halo around her head.

I grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head, kissing a pattern from her ear down her neck as she pushed herself against me. Ignoring my throbbing cock, I grabbed some soap and lathered it in my hands. Then I traced my fingers over her neck and down her collarbone, to the tops of her breasts. She instinctively arched into me, and I smirked as my hands dipped lower, cupping her tits.

“You’re breathtaking,” she mouthed, bringing her own hands down and roaming them over my torso, my chest, my biceps. She liked to explore my body, and her touch made me come alive.

The scene in my head slammed shut and I was back to the present, back in the castello. My temples throbbed and I opened and closed my mouth soundlessly as I begged my mind to take me back to that place of comfort. Instead, just as I was about to reach a hand out to search for the warm body I knew lay beside me, my vision blurred and I was yanked back to yet another memory.

Clean tiles were replaced by blood-soaked walls. My lungs capsized.

I’d always thought my father’s torture was the worst thing life had to offer. That was no longer the case. I was in hell, and this time I was alone. I could scream until my lungs turned raw, but I knew Amon wouldn’t be coming to my aid.

Blood covered every inch of my prison, like a grotesque scene out of a horror film.

But that wasn’t the part that had me gagging. It was the scent of burning flesh. I looked down to assess the damage and started cataloging the cuts and gashes across my torso, still sensitive even hours later. It was part of my routine—the only thing that tethered me to reality. The skin on my back protested from the lashings I’d received yesterday, but I couldn’t turn over, my wrists and ankles bound.

Hours turned into days. Days turned into weeks.

A young girl, maybe in her late teens, stood next to my bed, shaking like a leaf. She had the wrong shade of brown hair and blue eyes. She hadn’t wanted this any more than I did, yet I’d seen firsthand what happened to the women who didn’t obey him. And while I fought it, hating to be touched, I couldn’t watch another woman be mauled to death by dogs in what was one of Perez’s sadistic torture techniques.

Perez Cortes would pay for this. One day. Somehow. Some way.

I scanned the vicinity and found my captor, his bottomless black eyes the very essence of my nightmares. There wasn’t an ounce of soul behind that gaze.

“Time for your next lesson, Leone.” He purred like a cat and smiled like a snake. “I must admit. I didn’t realize it’d be so hard to break you, but we’ve got time. Your father’s not even attempting to save you, sitting in that castle like a king without a crown. Do you know why?” I clenched my teeth,

refusing to engage with the fucker. Not that it worked. "I'll tell you why. He believes you to be worthless."

"Tell me something I don't know," I coughed. "Get on with your sick shit or shut the fuck up."

The pain in my body was agonizing. I craved oblivion. At least then my mind would shut down and the pain would be somewhat bearable.

I wasn't aware of the guard behind me until it was too late. Not that I'd have been able to do anything to block his hit anyway.

I watched the metal bat gleam beneath the fluorescent light as it came crashing into my skull and the pain soared through me, past the point of return.

Then… the world turned black, yanking me into the darkness, taking my memories with it.

I startled awake, perspiration clinging to my skin, and felt my stiff limbs twitch and constrict. Almost as if I were back in that cell. Not my father's, but the one I could only recall as being my personal hell.

As I forced my body and mind to settle, taking deep breaths in and out through my nose like Dr. Freud had taught me, I could see the light of the full moon reflecting off pale skin. *Phoenix.*

All the memories I'd locked away suddenly rushed back, and my head felt like it would explode. I *felt* the memories return—felt them as my scars burned. As my heart pounded and my muscles convulsed. Felt them as that smell of burning flesh filled my senses again. Pain. Terror. I couldn't pull apart what was real and what was a fragment of my unconscious mind, but the horrified part of me knew they were one and the same. *It was all real*.

I was frozen to the bed, the only anchor being Phoenix's steady breathing as she slept, unaware of what was happening to me, of how broken and fucked up I really was.

The days and weeks in captivity. Torture. Pain. Both physical and mental. But then there were the other, lighter ones. Memories of Phoenix and me dancing in wide-open fields, the two of us in the cabin. Of her telling me about the baby.

I promised I'd take care of them. And then… *Fuck!*

When I woke up in the hospital, I remembered feeling as if something had been stolen from me. For days and weeks afterward, I couldn't get any respite as I searched for memories that came up blank. Until now.

And I finally understood what I’d lost in that cage in the jungle. The most important person in my life.

Phoenix and Skye were mine. They’d always been mine.

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FIFTY-SEVEN

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PHOENIX

I couldn't shake off the feeling of guilt for lying to him about having amnesia. The irony of it all didn't escape me. He actually had amnesia, and unknowingly, I used it to get back at him. I should come clean, but I didn't want to ruin the moment.

I groaned inwardly. *Of all the damn scenarios and lies, why did I come up with amnesia?*

Dante lifted his head, sensing my eyes on him, and his eyes were ablaze with heat. And then there was that look again. He'd been giving it to me since we woke up. He had been acting weird the entire flight over, studying me with a lazy tug of his lips. Almost as if he knew something.

And then there were the reverent glances he threw Skye's way, full of emotions that made my chest ache. The two of them spent the whole flight in the cockpit, nagging Dante's pilots, geeking out and asking a million questions, Skye pointing to each pilot control button and signing, *What about that one?* and *Can I press this one?* to which Dante would translate patiently.

Somehow, in a matter of days, Skye became Dante's sidekick. If he claimed the sky was purple, she would fully support it, no arguments. *Because that's what family does*, she'd told me.

Dante hadn't asked me again for the name of the man who had fathered Skye. He hadn't asked many questions at all. I, on the other hand, had so many. I feigned that stupid amnesia and made everything worse though, so I couldn't actually ask anything.

"Home away from home," Dante declared as Cesar pulled up in front of the cabin, and the memories immediately sliced my heart open. This place

was the last time I was happy, at peace. The last time we were both innocent.

The back of my throat felt like sandpaper. The cabin looked exactly as I remembered. Exactly as it did in my dreams. It felt surreal being here.

The car came to a stop and Skye bolted out before either one of us could say anything.

“I’ll show her around,” Cesar offered.

A strange sense of nostalgia washed over me. This place felt like a safe haven five years ago. Could it ever feel that way again?

Dante helped me out of the car, his hand in mine, and together we walked toward the cabin, my heart in my throat. We stepped inside and my breath caught at the rush of memories. Tears sprang into my eyes, but I immediately blinked them back.

I couldn’t break down in front of Dante.

His hands came to my shoulders and he turned me around, forcing me to face him.

“You’re upset,” he stated. He’d always been so perceptive, even way back when. “Want to tell me why?”

I swallowed, shaking my head. It made me a coward, but how could I possibly tell him that five years ago, he was mine. Five years ago, we were going to raise our family together, and then he disappeared. I believed he’d abandoned us, but now I knew he was kidnapped and tortured.

I should have had more faith in him.

Dante cupped my face, his eyes drilling into me. “I remember. You. Me. This cabin. I *remember,* Nix,” he said as I stared at him wide-eyed, certain my mind was deceiving me or that I was misunderstanding. “That last day, you told me about the pregnancy. It was supposed to be the three of us dancing through life together from that moment on.”

He tightened his grip on me and my body almost collapsed as I fought back the tears but lost. It was one tear, then two, before I lost count and turned into a sobbing mess.

“*I didn’t forget*,” I admitted. His hands fell from my face and fear gripped my throat. “*I’m sorry I feigned amnesia. I was so upset when you never came back. Then when I ran into you again, I was so bitter and angry. I thought you were pretending not to remember our time together. I’m so sorry, Dante. I’m sorry that I didn’t say anything. My pride made me stupid and blind. I’m so sorry for everything.*” The force of my sobs shook

my body, terrified that he'd hate me. Terrified that he'd leave me. "*Please don't—*"

My knees gave out but he caught me, holding me in his grip as five years of anguish and pain broke the dam.

"Dandelion, finish that statement," he said slowly.

"*Don't hate me. Don't hate Skye. Please*," I mouthed. I tried my hardest to keep it together, but fear of losing him again and what that would mean when it came to our daughter shredded my heart to pieces.

"Listen to me, Nix. *Hate* and *you* will never be in the same sentence when it comes to my vocabulary." He rubbed my back gently as I trembled. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. For Skye."

"*You know*?"

"She's ours," he stated with conviction. "I remember that much. I failed you, but I won't ever again. We still have so many years in front of us, and we'll make it right for her." He wiped my tears away, his forehead dropping to mine. "I have so many wrongs to right."

"*You forgive me for being so mean to you? You lost your memory and I shot you. Sprayed you with mace. Jesus, at every turn, I was meaner and meaner to you.*"

"There's no wrong you can do that I wouldn't forgive. I need to earn your forgiveness."

I didn't deserve him, but I'd spend the rest of my life making it up to him. "You forgive me, dandelion?"

"*There's nothing to forgive*." Then I shook my head, wrapping my arms around his neck, my lips pressing against his. Pulling away, I met his gaze. "*I kidnapped her, Dante*," I signed my admission. "*She was adopted by Sasha and Branka Nikolaev. They'll come for her, and they'll kill us.*"

I told him everything. From the moment Grandma took her from me to what I did in New Orleans. There was no shock in his eyes. No judgment.

Only the old Dante I remembered. From before.

Dante

I had never wanted anything more than her and our baby.

Five years ago that was taken away from me. Today, I'd be damned if I let that happen. While still a little fuzzy, the puzzle pieces were finally in

place—in my mind and my life. I wouldn't let anything get in my way again.

Not the Nikolaevs. Not the devil himself.

In the foyer of the cabin, I listened to Phoenix pour it all out. Her anguish. Her terror. I didn't interrupt her until she was finished, her body heaving with the force of her sobs.

"*I'm so sorry. My grandma planted the seed, and I believed you left us and didn't want the responsibility. And then when I saw you again, I pushed you away. Again and again. Oh my God. Dante… I shot you*." She brought her hand to her mouth, stifling her sobs.

"It's okay."

She shook her head, and I had to fight to bottle my own emotions. Watching her in tears like this all but tore me apart. She looked at me, then frantically signed, "*How can you even say it's okay? It's not.*"

"All that matters is that you're with me. You and Skye. I'll fix everything."

Her shoulders slumped for a moment before a new shot of determination filled her. She had to be the strongest woman I knew. "*I should help you*."

"Let me work out a plan and we can go from there."

She nodded and I cupped her face and wiped her tears before pressing my lips against hers. This one hit differently. It was filled with promises and apologies. It was filled with love.

"*I love you so much*," she mouthed against my lips.

It was all I wanted to hear. A desperate groan vibrated in my chest, and I threaded my hand through her curls, fisting them in my hand to pull her closer. I deepened the kiss, needing her with an urgency unlike ever before. Five years of loneliness had caught up to me.

The sound of the door opening pulled me apart from her, and we both turned to find Cesar and Skye standing there.

"Did you two figure it out finally?" Cesar asked, and I narrowed my eyes at my right-hand man. "I only figured it out when you brought them to the castle."

"You knew I had a thing with her five years ago?" I growled.

Cesar shook his head. "I knew you had a thing with *someone*. I didn't know who. It wasn't until I saw Skye that I realized."

Skye’s eyes darted from her mamma to me, then to Cesar, only to return to me. I lowered to my haunches and called her over. The fact she ran over to me without hesitation almost had me bawling like a baby.

Jesus, what was happening to me?

“*You’re my papà, aren’t you*?” she signed, her eyes filled with hope.

I nodded and my throat squeezed painfully.

“I’m your papà.” My voice trembled and so did my hands.

Phoenix took her bottom lip between her teeth, trying to stay strong. I lost that battle. I pulled Skye into my arms and held her tight while my chest twisted with memories. My hands shook as I brushed the hair off my daughter’s forehead, my attention divided between my wife and her.

I had found them again, in more ways than one. Five years lost.

Our beginning was a series of almosts and what-ifs, but our ending wouldn’t be. I wouldn’t allow it.

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FIFTY-EIGHT

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PHOENIX

Skye was tucked in bed for the night while Dante, Cesar, and I sat in front of the fireplace. They sat on either side of me, Dante's hand on my thigh. I found that since his memories had returned, he needed to be touching me constantly. Almost as if he needed reassurance that this was all real.

It'd been a week since we arrived at the cabin. Amon had been anointed as the head of the Romero family, and much to my shock, he was also my half brother. That hadn't shaken me as much as the knowledge that Reina had been captured and tortured by the same man as Dante. That I wasn't there for her.

I had to be the worst sister to ever walk this earth.

"She's better," Dante assured. "If she wasn't, she wouldn't have sent me all those messages once I told her we eloped. Trust me, she found her fighting spirit."

He was right. Underneath her sunshine personality and wide smiles, she had always been a fighter.

"*I should have been there for her.*"

Cesar smiled, then spoke slowly so I could read his lips. "You need a breather. Focus on your kid and this schmuck."

I laughed while Dante narrowed his eyes at him. It was nice to laugh. Taking one another through our painful experiences since Dante's memories came back had been exhausting, both mentally and emotionally. If it weren't for Skye entertaining us and Cesar keeping an eye on her—and jabbing us with the occasional taunt—the tension would've been too heavy

to bear. I wasn't sure how long we could ignore the Nikolaev threat, but this week had been magnificent.

I was glad Dante had insisted we remain here despite the threat. The days were almost normal. We'd wake up, have breakfast together, take long, lazy drives out to Dante's vineyards. He and Skye would walk hand in hand through rows of grapes and he'd talk to her all about the winemaking process. It was comical and sweet as hell. The afternoons we'd spend exploring the woods around the cabin and then we'd all pile into the kitchen, including Cesar who claimed he wasn't good with knives, and prepare dinner.

It was magical. Until someone would inevitably mention the Nikolaevs.

"You need to call in the forces," Cesar said, attempting to reason with Dante again.

My happiness dampened slightly at the exchange, and I tried to focus on the roaring fire and how sleepy the radiating heat was making me.

"*Shouldn't we take them to court?*" I suggested again, and both of them shot me a wry look. "*Well, we have a leg to stand on. I never signed the papers, and I was over eighteen*."

"You'd be okay sending your grandmother to jail?" Cesar asked curiously.

"*To keep Skye, absolutely*." My words were shitty, but they were already out in the open and there was no retracting them. Cesar and Dante tensed, their faces hardened. "*You think I should forgive her?*" Cesar opened his mouth to say something, but Dante shot him a glare. "*What?*"

Cesar avoided looking at me, so I glared at Dante.

"It's nothing important." The way Cesar's body flinched told me it was.

"*If it's not important, then tell me*," I signed, agitated.

"We didn't come here to ruin our time." Dante's muscles were pulled tight to the point of exploding.

"*You're right*," I agreed. "*But we also didn't come here to bury our heads in the sand*."

Cesar nodded. "Might as well tell her."

"*Yes, tell me*," I demanded.

Dante rubbed the back of his neck and muttered something under his breath. I imagined they were very colorful words.

"We found a note in your grandmother's safe," he finally said. My brows furrowed, watching him and waiting for an explanation. "It was to

my father from her. It was dated right before the kidnapping."

I swallowed. "*You think she might have had something to do with your kidnapping?*"

I wanted to believe my grandma wasn't capable of something so sinister, but after witnessing her scrutiny of my mamma and the way she manipulated the system to get rid of my baby, I wasn't sure what to believe anymore.

"It sure as fuck looks like it," Cesar stated with a grim expression.

Disappointment and anger made for a heavy heart. Throat thick, I forced all my emotions down and met my husband's eyes. "*Let's ask her, then.*"

It took about twenty minutes for Dante to reroute our IP address so it'd be hard for anyone to trace. *Not impossible*, he'd said. Just very difficult.

I punched in my grandma's number and waited for the signal to connect. It rang and rang, and just as I was about to hang up, her face appeared. Her eyes widened when she saw me. She was probably expecting to never hear from me again.

"Is everything okay?" She seemed distraught. Concerned even.

I went straight into attack mode.

"*Did you arrange for Dante Leone to be kidnapped?*" Her expression froze, and I knew I had my answer. It was written in her eyes and every line of her face. She betrayed us. She cost us five years. "*How could you?*"

"It was for your own good." Her eyes glimmered, but I didn't trust her tears. She was an actress through and through.

"*How did you know it was him? That he was the father of my baby?*" I demanded. "*I never gave you his name*." She didn't answer, and the fury inside my chest grew tenfold. "*Tell me. Or I swear to God, you won't have any family left after I'm done with you.*"

"I had you followed."

I sensed Cesar and Dante's bodies tense next to me, but all my attention was on my grandma's face. I didn't want a single flicker of emotion to escape me.

“*He was going to take care of me. How could you betray me like that? Him? Our unborn child?*”

The ache in my chest became unbearable.

“I promised your mamma I’d take care of you. She’s probably rolling in her grave right now seeing both of her daughters married to mobsters.”

“*So you sent him to be tortured?*” I was furious, and the buzzing in my brain was getting louder by the second.

“His father *raped* your mother. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

I wanted to scream. I needed to rage as we stared at each other. “*His father’s sins aren’t his*.” I shook my head in disappointment. “*Don’t come anywhere near my family, or—*”

My words were cut off when a bang shook the ground. A body slammed into me, flattening me to the ground. The phone was forgotten as chaos erupted. I met my husband’s eyes, and we exchanged looks full of promises before he reached for his gun and started shooting.

“*Skye*.” I wasn’t sure if my daughter’s name was a scream or a thought. All I knew was that I had to get to her. I couldn’t lose her. Not again.

Cesar had crawled to the window and was shooting outside at an invisible enemy. He fired nonstop until there were no bullets left.

The three of us looked at each other and released long breaths. This was it. Our happily ever after was being cut short again.

It was history repeating itself.

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FIFTY-NINE

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DANTE

Cesar and I fired our guns, and from the sound of it, we were taking men down, but we were also outnumbered and unprepared. The fun really began when we were out of ammo. Vasili, Alexei, and Sasha Nikolaev stood at the doorway.

"Grab Skye and run," I mouthed to Nix.

"*I'm not leaving you*." Stubborn woman. I knew there was no sense in arguing with her. I shoved her behind me, then pulled out my knife just as I saw Cesar do the same. We ran toward the three men. Sasha went after me, Alexei after Cesar. Vasili just leaned against the doorway and observed. I guess the fucker didn't want to get his hands dirty.

"I'm going to end you and your woman."

I grinned savagely. "You can try, Nikolaev. But don't think I won't take you down with me."

Sasha slashed his knife at me, and I blocked it with my own. One of the Nikolaev men appeared out of nowhere and jabbed toward my stomach, but I dodged it. In return, I rammed my knife into his thigh.

He went down with a cry and tried to get up, but Nix was right behind him, smashing a vase against his skull.

"That's my wife," I said proudly.

"That's a kidnapper," Sasha hissed.

Cesar seemed to be struggling to keep Alexei at bay—not that I could blame him. The word on the street was that Alexei Nikolaev grew up fighting to survive, so he fought dirty.

My right-hand man went down with a battle cry, fighting with all he had, but eventually Alexei caught him from behind, one arm locked around

his throat.

Sasha jumped forward, but I dodged him again, slashing his wrist so he'd drop the knife. The goddamn idiot refused. I suspected he'd hold on to that knife even if his fingers were broken and his arms were full of bullet holes.

In one swift move, I whipped around and pulled him into a chokehold. Now we stood facing Alexei against Cesar, all four of us breathing heavily and muttering curses. Sasha grunted but still refused to drop his knife. He struggled like a madman until we lost our balance. We landed on the ground, me on top of him. Debris and broken glass everywhere.

Nix gasped, but I kept my focus on Sasha, keeping Alexei in my peripheral vision.

"Papà." It was barely a whisper, but we all froze. My eyes found my daughter, Nix already running to her. She picked her up and turned her away from the Nikolaev men, using her own body as a shield.

"Why is my daughter calling you papà?" Sasha growled like a madman.

"Because she's my daughter."

He started fighting me again. "No, she's not. She's mine."

"Stoooop." Nix's wailing startled us all.

"Boys, you might want to listen to her for now. The child doesn't need to see this shit." At least Vasili Nikolaev had some sense.

"*What's happening, Mamma*?" Skye signed, her hands shaking, and my heart twisted. She wasn't supposed to witness this, much less be caught in the crossfire. "*Why is Sasha beating up Papà?*"

Sasha and I winced and then reluctantly disentangled from each other, still poised to attack.

Nix smiled shakily. "*They're playing rough. Boys do that sometimes when they're feeling silly*."

Judging by the look in her sapphire eyes, Skye didn't believe her. Then the lights went off and blackness fell upon us. My phone started beeping, signaling the central control system had been penetrated.

It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. Moonlight streamed through the windows, and soon more shapes appeared in the distance.

"You expecting more men?" I asked, staring at the dark shadow on my left.

"They're not ours," Vasili hissed.

“Come on,” I said. “I’ll fight you later, but let’s make one thing clear, you’re not taking my daughter from me.”

“She’s *my* daughter.”

“Shut the fuck up, you two.” I wasn’t sure if it was Alexei or Vasili who’d grunted those words, but we did as instructed. I whispered instructions to the men, telling them to follow me as I had the cabin’s blueprint mapped out.

We crouched behind some low shrubbery when we finally got outside. Vasili pointed to the far left corner of the woods where five men were positioned, guns at the ready. They hid behind a massive rock that I’d been meaning to remove for years because of this exact reason. Skye loved playing on it since we arrived, so it had fallen to the bottom of my priority list.

We raised our guns and fired. “Dante, you better be alive, you motherfucker, or Reina will have my balls.”

I froze. “Amon?”

“Who the fuck else would come to save your ass?”

Cesar and I were quick to think on our feet. We both turned and aimed our guns at the Nikolaev brothers.

“Well, this has been the quickest stab in the back I’ve ever experienced,” Alexei drawled, annoyance flaring in his icy tone.

“Ditto.”

“What else can you expect from Italians,” Sasha interjected, aiming his gun at me.

My brother had the Nikolaev men surrounded. He flashed them all a smile. “Gentlemen.”

“Fuck off,” Sasha deadpanned.

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing. Considering you’re on my brother’s property.” Amon took a few more steps, and to my surprise, Luca DiMauro and Aiden stood by him.

“He snatched my kid,” Sasha gritted, clearly fed up. “And you two stand by this fucker?”

“I had a debt to repay,” Luca explained, his hands casually in his pockets. “Aiden too. It’s some two-for-one kind of shit.”

Amon helped Luca’s wife several years back, and it would seem he wasted his favor on me. Jesus, I’d owe my brother big-time for the remainder of my days.

“That’s right. It’s shit.” Sasha glared at him. “Don’t ask me to save your ass ever again.”

Luca shrugged. “A debt’s a debt.”

A small shadow appeared behind me, and judging by the men’s expressions, I knew who it was.

Nix came to stand next to me, Skye’s arms wrapped around her neck, her face buried in her mother’s hair.

“Put the gun down, Dante.” The voice she barely ever let anyone hear pierced through my heart and told me exactly how scared she was. She’d rather let strangers hear her speak than put Skye down and sign. I didn’t move. I couldn’t let anything happen to them. She closed the distance between us and handed me my daughter. “Hold her.”

Once my arms were full, Nix’s eyes found Amon and then darted behind him. “*Is my sister here?*”

He shook his head. “No, I thought it was probably best that she didn’t witness this.”

She swallowed. “*I’m not giving Skye away to keep any kind of peace. She’s my daughter*.”

“You gave her away once,” Sasha snapped.

“Sasha, go easy,” Vasili warned. “We agreed we’d hear their reasoning.”

“*You* agreed,” he gritted. “I want to kill them and take my kid home.”

“She didn’t put her up for adoption,” I chimed in, cutting off their bickering. Alexei didn’t seem to say much of anything. “And neither did I.” Silence followed, along with their confusion. “Phoenix never signed off on the adoption papers. Her grandmother took control of the situation and manipulated Phoenix when she was barely eighteen years old.”

“Why didn’t you claim your daughter sooner?” Vasili asked, turning to face me.

“Five years ago, I was kidnapped. I came out of it with amnesia. For a while, I didn’t remember shit. The memories slowly trickled in, but never these. Not until about a week ago.”

“Jesus Christ.”

Jesus Christ was right. There was no way for us all to walk away from this clusterfuck with a happy ending.

“Branka will be heartbroken,” Vasili remarked.

“You fucking think?” Sasha growled, glaring at all of us. “I don’t give a shit what their history is. Branka and I adopted Skye. Legally, she’s ours.”

I raised my gun, pointing it at him again just as he aimed his at me, but Nix stepped between us. Her head darted between me and Sasha, her hip just inches from mine. So close I could almost reach out and protect her from the danger that was a cornered Sasha.

She met his eyes head-on and straightened her shoulders. "*Don't do this. Please.*"

"Give me Skye and I'll let you both live," Sasha said. He was fucking crazy if he thought he'd take my daughter from us. I just got our family back together, and I would rather die than let anyone take it from me.

Nix's eyes met mine. "*Can you translate for me?*" she signed. Sasha's ASL must have been poor at best. I nodded, and she turned her attention to Sasha. "*I'm sorry for the way things worked out. I really am. I should have stood up to my grandma five years ago. I didn't. I should have fought her before I left the hospital. I didn't. But I am fighting now. There is only one thing I can offer you that can hopefully ease some of the pain.*"

Sasha snickered. "What? You have another kid around that you can give us? We don't want another kid. We want Skye."

Skye reached out her little hand and touched Nix's cheek. "*If you want me to go, I can go with them. I don't want you to be hurt, Mamma*."

Nix shook her head, her lips trembling and emotions clearly etched on her face.

"Fuck, this is bad," Vasili hissed even though he couldn't know what Skye had just communicated to her mother. "Sasha, you have to be reasonable."

"Stand by me, damn it," Sasha growled. "Fuck them. Skye has known Branka and me for far longer."

"She's bonded to Nix," I argued. "To me. We'll forever be grateful that you stepped up and took her in, but she belongs with us. If you want war, you'll get it. You want death, you'll get it. But my daughter isn't going anywhere with you."

"This will destroy Branka." Something pained flashed in Sasha' eyes, and I could almost see the last of his resolve leave his body.

"*I can carry your baby for you and Branka.*" Nix's signed words slashed through the air. For a moment, or maybe a stretch of a moment, my mind blanked, refusing to grasp her meaning.

Then it rushed forward. "Now I'm definitely going to kill him," I hissed, my finger itching to pull the trigger and blow up that fucker's brain

while the two of us glared at each other with hate.

“Try it, Italian,” Sasha challenged, already pointing his gun at me. “Nothing would give me more pleasure than to blow your brains all over this forest floor.”

“*Stop it*.” Nix waved her hand, demanding my attention while the rest of the Nikolaevs muttered curses in Russian too.

I met my wife’s gaze. “Fuck no! If you think I’ll let this Russian motherfu—”

Nix shook her head. “*Not like that, Dante. Jesus. As a surrogate*.” She turned back to Sasha. “*Both of you calm down and think about it. I know you love Skye, but this child would be yours in every way. Yours and Branka’s.*”

The sound of leaves rustling through the forest floor filled the silence. The breeze picked up and matched the tension as we all stared at each other. Nix’s plan was a good one as long as that blond motherfucker didn’t touch her.

“That could… work.” Sasha’s tone was full of hope and reluctance. “But I have one condition of my own.” I stiffened, waiting for him to continue. “We want to keep Skye in our lives. However that might look.”

Nix released a long, relieved breath, and then she flashed him a smile that had to have melted the ice around his heart.

“*Agreed*.” She extended her hand.

Our daughter’s head in Phoenix’s lap, I watched my wife’s fingers stroke through Skye’s hair, her blue eyes drooping at the motion. It took no time for her to be fully asleep, and my wife’s eyes found me.

Worry still lingered in them. The Nikolaev men left just as quickly as they arrived, leaving Cesar, Amon, and me, along with the guards that roamed the acres outside.

“Thank you for coming,” I told my brother. “You saved my ass. Again.”

“Always,” he vowed.

“How did you know to show up here? That the Nikolaevs would attack?”

He shot me a grin. “I hacked into Konstantin’s communication. Tatiana apparently had lots of things to say about Skye’s kidnapping.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, that woman has too many opinions.”

“*Is Tatiana upset?*” Nix chimed in, chewing on her bottom lip with worry.

“They’ll live,” I assured her, and Amon nodded his agreement.

“They will. And your solution—although unconventional—will save our relations.”

She nodded and lowered her eyes on our daughter. Jesus, our daughter.

“She’s mine,” I told Amon. “Both of them.”

He gave me a wry smile. “You don’t say, huh?”

Cesar rubbed his neck. “Yeah, you don’t say. I couldn’t see you fighting those crazy motherfuckers just for the hell of it.”

“I know how you can pay me back,” Amon said suddenly and I met his gaze. “Have your wife explain it all to Reina. Her history, what’s just happened now, her future plans. I’m assuming she wants to stay with you?”

As if sensing we were talking about her, Nix raised her eyes. “What do you say, Nix?” I mouthed. “Want to stay with me?”

She nodded. “*Forever*.”

And I knew right there and then, the three of us would dance through life together.

One Month Later

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SIXTY

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DANTE

Tap… tap… tap… tap… tap.

Dr. Freud watched me curiously as I tapped my fingers on the armrest. The only other sound in the otherwise silent space was the ticking of the clock.

"So are we back to on-demand therapy sessions?" she said, finally breaking the silence.

I smiled. "This will be my last one."

She tilted her head and her eyebrows creased. "Why?"

"Because I found what I've been missing. My wife and daughter." My voice turned thoughtful. "You were right. In a way, I was blocking my own memories, shielding myself from the pain." Dr. Freud's gaze fell to the ring on my finger. "I didn't think she'd want me back after—" My voice broke off and I cleared my throat. There was a fine line between things I should and shouldn't share. "Once she accepted me, the puzzle pieces fell into place."

Blackouts and fits of rage were no longer a threat. Life was good, the best it'd ever been. We'd been back in the castello for the past month, and every day the smiles on my family's faces grew wider and brighter. It told me I was doing something right.

"The mysterious woman who leashes your demons, huh?"

"The one and only."

A smile curved my lips as I thought of Nix and the way I left her this morning. Naked in my bed. Today was our marriage celebration day. Reina requested Romero have the chance to walk at least one daughter down the

aisle. I wasn't thrilled about it, but Nix agreed, and I could admit it was the right thing to do.

So today was the day.

"And when she's not around?" Dr. Freud asked curiously.

"Like now?" She nodded. "Well, I've set us all up with trackers, and so far that's helped." It was probably not something the doctor would deem healthy, or even logical, but it worked for us. It had actually been Phoenix's idea, one she reminded me of when she spoke of the black pager that was supposed to be our emergency get-in-touch method. I failed her then, but never again. We never did things the normal way anyhow. "So you'll be happy to know you were right."

She chuckled. "I don't hear that too often from men." She shifted her legs and crossed them. "How are you adjusting to being a father?"

"I love every second of it." My daughter kept me on my toes. There wasn't a single day that was the same as the one before. They made my world brighter. Two days ago, I found my wife teaching Skye to play piano. Yesterday, I arrived home to find Phoenix and Skye dancing to the music cranked up to the highest volume even though they couldn't hear it. They squealed and laughed, carefree, rattling the entire castello. It finally felt like home.

I drew my gaze up to her, a tinge of amusement passing through her eyes. "Having a family suits you."

I let out a low laugh.

"It does," I agreed. And I wouldn't let anyone take it away from me.

I got to my feet and adjusted my cufflinks. "Now excuse me, Doctor, I have to go get married."

Phoenix

"I'm so happy we're going to live so close." Reina beamed. She looked the happiest I'd ever seen her. I felt like that too. She came behind me and worked the laces on my new wedding dress, her design. Once she was done, she came around again and faced me. "Are you happy?"

"*Very*," I assured her. My eyes darted to my flower girl. My daughter. She and Dante had become my whole life. "It's all I've ever wanted."

She sighed in relief. "Mamma would be so happy for us." I suspected she signed because her words would get choked up in her throat. Not that I

would hear them. “And I have a niece. I couldn’t be happier. She had to be part mine, especially with her strong love for everything pink.”

I smiled. “*Thank you for accepting her*.”

“Always,” she vowed. “I’ll always have your back, sis.”

My throat squeezed, but this time it was with happiness. No more sadness and sorrows.

Skye clapped her hands, tugging on both of us. “*It’s time*.”

Rays of sun trickled through the church’s stained-glass windows as I made my way down the familiar aisle. I felt the vibrations of the organs in my every step as they grew in sync with my papà’s. I gripped my bouquet in front of me. My friends’ and family’s eyes watched me, but there were only two sets I was aware of.

My daughter’s, who kept glancing over her shoulder as she sprinkled dandelions over the tiled floor, and my husband’s, who waited for me at the altar. They were my everything.

As Dante watched me slowly approach, it felt just as intense as it did the first time, the only difference being that we were now surrounded by our loved ones. His look conveyed so much—love, desire, *promises*. My heartbeats tripped over themselves as we neared him. Three steps… two… one.

Papà faced me and lifted my veil, pressing a kiss on both of my cheeks. With a small nod, he placed my hand into Dante’s waiting one. Bliss shot through my veins the moment our skin touched.

The same priest recited the words and I repeated them excitedly, knowing there was nothing more I wanted in this life than to be with him and Skye. When it was time for a kiss, I rose on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his, kissing him like it was our first time. Like it was our last.

The guests clapped and cheered enthusiastically, but they just faded into the background.

“*I love you*,” I mouthed against his lips, and he took the opportunity to slip his tongue in, making me squeal and slap his chest.

He grinned and pulled back, intertwining our fingers as we walked down the aisle and across the little courtyard that led us into the ballroom in the castello.

As soon as we made it into the entrance hall, I turned to him. “*We did it, now we can have a wedding night all over again.*”

He laughed and turned to face me, brushing his knuckles against my cheek. “Not yet. I have a surprise for you.”

Skye appeared at that moment and jumped excitedly, her light pink dress puffing out like a balloon.

A flirty smile pulled on my lips. “*Tell me what it is*.” My eyes darted to my daughter. “*Please*.”

She shook her head. “*No spoilers*.”

The crowd from the church made their way into the ballroom and it wasn’t long before everyone’s eyes were on us.

He smiled. “It’s time.”

I blinked in confusion but followed both his and Skye’s eyes to the band. I frowned, still not following.

Dante made a finger motion, as if he were a conductor instructing the band. The guitarist leaned over and turned the volume higher and higher. The floor vibrated. The chandelier shook and so did the windows. The notes rumbled through my feet, and I smiled as Dante took my hand, leading me and Skye to the dance floor.

And then I saw it. The sign language interpreter, signing the words to the song. My brows pulled together and I shot Dante a curious look, he grinned.

“It’s our song. ‘Dandelions’ by Ruth B.”

His gaze pinned mine with intensity and then he started mouthing the words. I looked over to the interpreter.

When you’re looking at me,

I’ve never felt so alive and free.

The lyrics had my heart trembling with unfiltered joy. My gaze returned to my husband and my heart stopped, remembering how we danced five years ago in the field of dandelions. My pulse drummed in my ears, staring at the man who stole my breath.

He lifted Skye up, her feet dangling in the air as we danced.

Amidst the heartache and pain, we’d found each other again. My eyes burned and a tear rolled down my cheek.

He brushed the tear away, smiling fondly. “I love you, Nix.”

“*I love you too*.”

Skye wrapped her hands around our necks and pecked both of our cheeks. “*Best day ever*.”

Dante bent his head, resting his forehead against mine. “I couldn’t agree more, princess.”

I got what I always wanted—a family of my own right here in my arms.

After the song ended, I danced with my father, then my brother-in-law, and it wasn’t long before my feet were killing me. Before anyone else could nab me, I made my way to the buffet, starving for some solid food, when I felt the presence of people behind me and lifted my head with a smile on my face, fully expecting Dante and his sidekick.

My smile froze when I spotted my grandma behind me, an exasperated Reina in tow. It didn’t take long for Skye to appear, wrapping her arms around Reina’s legs. My daughter loved her aunt.

“*Grandma*,” I greeted tightly. “*I didn’t realize you were into crashing weddings.*” I wouldn’t ruin my day, just as long as she kept her distance from me and my daughter.

Grandma shot me a tentative smile. “You look beautiful.”

“*Reina designed the dress, so I would hope so*,” I stated, ignoring her smiles.

“Grandma wants to talk to you,” Reina stated the obvious, her smile forced. This was the exact reason why I insisted Grandma not be invited. I just knew it would backfire, and sure enough, I was right.

As if sensing my thoughts, Grandma rushed to chime in. “Please, Phoenix. Let me explain.”

“*There’s nothing to explain*,” I snapped. “*Nothing you say can possibly make it alright. Please don’t ruin today.*”

“At least let me talk to Dante and—”

“*No*.” I met her gaze, letting her see the depths of my fury. “*You allowed Perez Cortes to get his hands on him and torture him. Do you even know what he went through? Nobody deserves that, not a single person*.”

Reina paled and regret instantly hit me for bringing up the memory for her. “Trust me, Phoenix. I paid for it when he kidnapped Reina.”

That was it. I strode to my grandma and jabbed my finger in her face. “*You didn’t pay for it, Grandma. Reina paid for it. We’re all paying for it while you just move on to another marriage.*”

Guilt snuck up on me then, slithering through my veins and filling my chest. I was to blame too, because I left.

“Please, both of you, stop it.” Reina’s hands shook. “Grandma, you should respect Phoenix’s wishes and leave. This is her wedding.”

Surprise, surprise. Grandma ignored her.

“I panicked, Phoenix,” Grandma hurriedly explained. “It was like witnessing the cycle repeat. Over and over again. I started it decades ago by making my mistake, and I was desperate to end it. But all I kept seeing were more mistakes being made. First your mom, then you, and even Reina.”

My heart squeezed. It wasn’t a good enough excuse for putting Dante through hell. For robbing us of our daughter’s first five years of her life.

As if he could sense my distress, Dante appeared behind Grandma, towering like a dark, protective cloud about to eliminate any threat.

“Ladies,” he greeted them, his expression softening as his eyes darted to Reina. “Hey, sis.”

“Dante, this wedding is beautiful. I’m happy to see you’re treating my sister right.” Reina was desperate to change the subject, to steer the conversation in a different direction.

My husband’s eyes met mine, giving me a long look that had butterflies taking flight in my stomach. “My daughter made it clear she’ll whoop my ass if I don’t,” he teased, speaking slowly for Skye’s benefit.

She giggled, her little chocolate-covered fingers clinging to Reina’s dress.

“Look what she’s doing.” Grandma leaned over and tried to peel Skye’s fingers from Reina’s dress, but Dante shot her a dark look.

“Touch her and I’ll end you, right here and now.” The expression on his face told her he meant it. “You might have gotten away with setting me up, but look at my family wrong and I’ll end you before you can blink.”

She froze midair, her eyes darting to Reina and then me, as if asking for help. Neither one of us reacted.

Regaining her composure, Grandma shot him a dry look. “I did what I had to do to protect my family.”

“*How did you arrange it?*” I asked, curiosity getting the best of me. It had been bothering me since Dante told me about the email he found in my grandma’s safe. When she shot me a confused look, I clarified, “*How did you arrange his kidnaping with Perez Cortes? It’s not like anyone can get in touch with those types of criminals*.”

She stared at me, her face as pale as snow. Grandma was beautiful even pushing into her golden years, but somewhere along the way, she had hardened.

As an uneasy sensation filled me, I started to wonder whether I really wanted to know the answer. And when she opened her mouth, I knew it was too late.

“Your grandfather.” Reina and I shared a confused look. Grandpa Glasgow only came into the picture around that time. “Your blood grandfather. He’s part of the underworld.”

“I don’t understand,” Reina breathed.

“He is… dangerous. He let me move on, but on one condition. I had to be… available to him over the years.”

“*Who is he*?” I demanded. All her broken relationships flashed through my mind like stills, each picture ending with Grandma disappearing and coming back with a diamond crown on her head. Our grandfather had been behind that all these years. I should have been shocked, horrified, but then again, we’d never been a conventional family. And that ended now.

She just shook her head, her lips thinning, and my chest twisted as the knowledge sank in. She still loved him. She’d sooner die than reveal his identity.

She made up my mind for me. “*I’m sorry, Grandma. I can’t forgive you. Stay away from my family*.”

And I couldn’t trust her to protect what mattered the most to me.

Dante might be unconventional. Crazy even. But he was mine and I was his. Our love was born from silence and shadows. Together we made noise and found the light. I wouldn’t let anyone take that away from us.

I had all I needed with my husband, daughter, and sister.

Ten Months Later

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EPILOGUE

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PHOENIX

Life had finally settled into some semblance of peace and normalcy.

It seemed like it'd been forever since the events at Lake Tahoe had taken place. The Nikolaev family continued to be part of Skye's life, as per our agreement. Once a month, Skye spent a weekend with them in New Orleans. Since I was their surrogate, they visited frequently and had all but attached themselves to our family. Even with the upcoming arrival of their baby, they claimed to want to continue the same arrangement.

I didn't mind it, but Dante sometimes got a tad bit jealous. I knew exactly how to distract him, and it involved taking full advantage of a child-free weekend.

Papà died a week after our wedding. He met his granddaughter and apologized for not being there for me. I forgave, but I hadn't forgotten. My grandma, on the other hand, I would never forgive. Reina tried her hand at mediating, but there was no point.

She had almost cost Dante his life and had been responsible for my own daughter's rough start in this world. I hated that woman with every fiber of my being. She almost ruined our lives. It was her duty to protect us, not condemn us.

After the whole ordeal with the Nikolaevs, we returned to Trieste. Skye loved living in Italy. She loved her aunt and uncle Amon. We saw them almost every week, and needless to say, my friends had fallen instantly in love with Skye too.

But nobody—not a single person on this planet—mattered to her as much as Dante. And, of course, me. She had earned herself a nickname: Dante's sidekick. Neither one of them minded.

I stared across the room at the two people who mattered more to me than anything else. My husband's eyes found mine and he mouthed "I love you," melting my heart further, his eyes blazing with passion and devotion. And even in my extremely pregnant state, I couldn't resist him. My whole body came alive when he watched me.

He and Skye had purchased a telescope and were now studying the stars.

I loved watching them together. So as I sat at the piano bench, my fingers dancing across the keys, vibrations of the music filled me, and I watched them with a happiness I still couldn't believe.

Sasha and Branka were due to arrive any moment. We'd made amends. A tentative alliance turned into a true friendship.

I lowered my eyes to my huge belly and my lips curved into a smile. Soon, the little bundle of joy would meet his parents. My sister had warned me that I was too young to do it and it would be hard to give the child up.

I didn't disagree, but I also knew that this baby belonged to Branka and Sasha. They'd been to every appointment and every sonogram, and had been by my side for every milestone. Dante and Skye too, cheering us all on.

The doctor said that baby boy Nikolaev was healthy and ready to come out any day now, even though he was predicting a late delivery. I, on the other hand, was convinced he was eager to meet his parents. Possibly even craved a cold Russian winter.

We were growing into a big family with unexpected alliances. Life had turned out better than anything I could've wished for.

A sharp pain lanced through my ribs and my fingers stopped moving, drawing Dante and Skye's attention.

I froze as I felt a wetness rush down my thighs.

"Ah, *cazzo*." I let the word vibrate in my throat. It was a new habit I created. Cursing in Italian. But only when I was home alone with my family.

I shared a look with my husband. "Is it time?" he signed.

I nodded. *"Where are the Nikolaevs?"*

He reached for his phone just as Cesar walked into the living room, Branka and Sasha trailing behind. I jumped to my feet, wincing as sharp pain pierced through my lower abdomen.

"*It's time.*"

They shared a look, smiling as their eyes found mine and realization hit them. It was finally their turn. They were about to be parents. And I couldn’t be happier for them.

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WHAT'S NEXT?

*Thank you so much for reading **Thorns of Silence**! If you liked it, please leave a review. Your support means the world to me.*

Thorns of Desire is the next book in this series https://bit.ly/3QhYwSg, but first there will be a conclusion for the Ashford brothers https://bit.ly/3Fg48pB.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Curious about Eva's other books? You can check them out here. Eva Winners's Books https://bit.ly/3SMMsrN

Eva Winners writes anything and everything romance, from enemies to lovers to books with all the feels. Her heroes are sometimes villains, because they need love too, right? Her books are sprinkled with a touch of suspense and mystery, a healthy dose of angst, a hint of violence and darkness, and lots of steamy passion.

When she's not working and writing, she spends her days either in Croatia or Maryland, daydreaming about her next story.

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